

BEADLE'S Dime New York Library

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Vol. IV.

Complete
In One Number.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
Ten Cents.

No. 47

Pacific Pete, The Prince of the Revolver.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "THE LONG HAIRIED 'PARDS,'" "OLD BULL'S EYE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE STAGE-DRIVER'S NEWS.

"It's a scan'alous fact!" Making this assertion with an impressive solemnity, Ginger Dick replaced the tumbler of greenish glass upon the well-polished white-pine bar, passed a red, puffy hand across his bristling mustache, to which still clung drops of the amber-hued "pizon," and then cast a glance of quiet satisfaction around upon the eager faces of his audience.

"You ain't stuffin' us, old man?" at length ventured the barkeeper, as Ginger Dick evidently paused for an answer or an exclamation of some sort.

"Thar—I knowed it! I said the boys wouldn't b'lieve sech a thing—nur I don't blame ye much. It does sound kinder fishy, when a feller thinks how long Dutch Frank has been cock o' the road. But the little cuss called the turn on 'im this time."

"Oil up ag'in, Ginger, an' then let's have the de-tails."

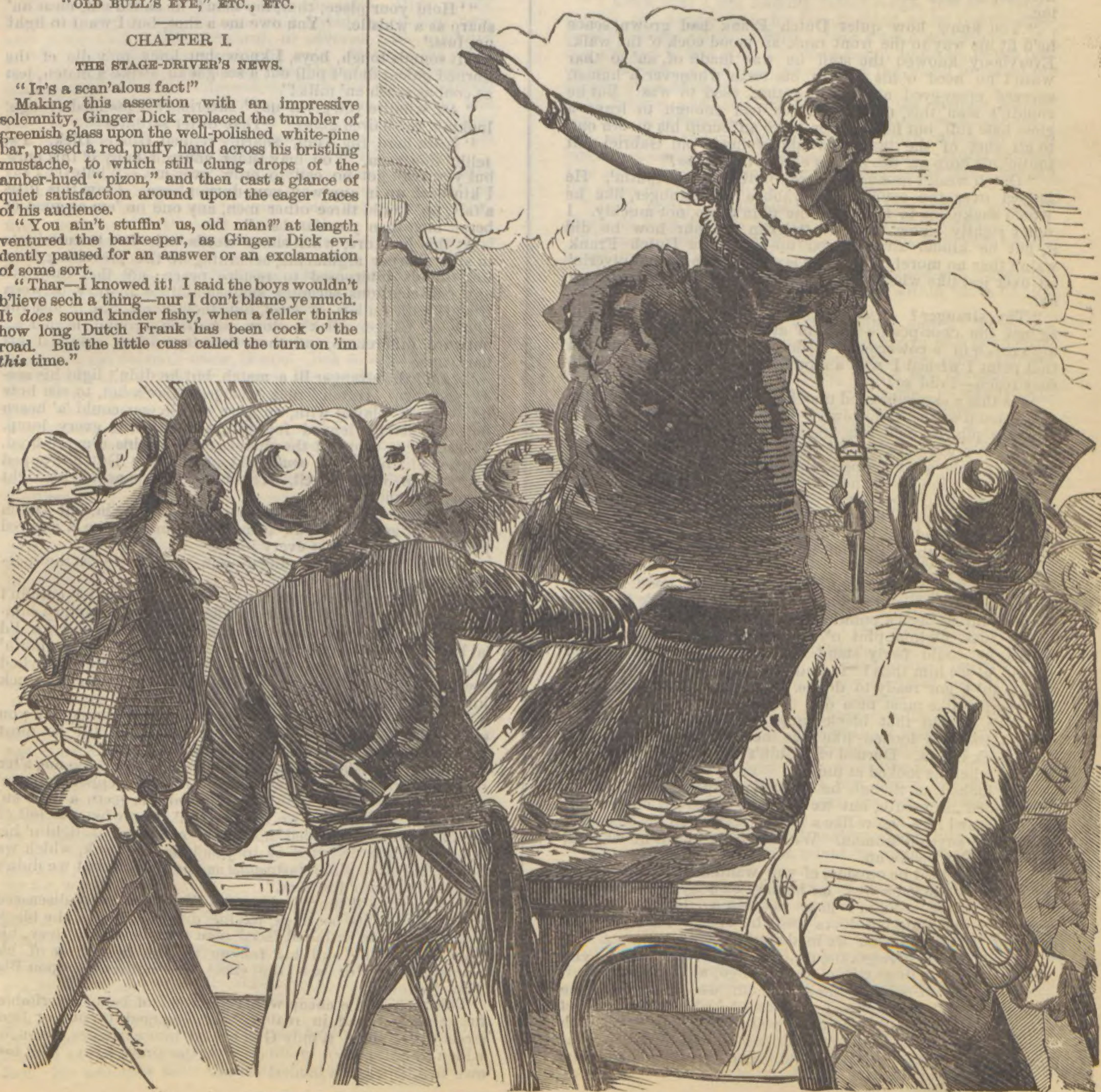
Nowise loth, Ginger Dick helped himself liberally to the liquid poison; then, leaning at ease against the counter, he began his story with all the *gout* of a professional yarn-spinner.

"We was on time, to a dot—"

"No need to tell that, Ginger," interrupted a

little red-faced man, with well-ventilated clothing. "When was the 'Western Belle' anything else since you first took the ribbons?"

The little man glanced longingly toward the black bottle and wiped his thick lips suggestively, but Ginger Dick simply acknowledged the compliment with a grave nod, and resumed.



"GENTLEMEN, ORDER! PUT UP YOUR WEAPONS—I COMMAND IT—I, PACIFIC PETE'S SISTER!"

We was on time, as I said afore. Thar was only four pilgrims—one outside an' three insides—when we stopped at Gabbert's fer grub. Thar was Vinegar Sol, Keno Dan and Jumpin' Jack. T'other was the stranger.

"You know the time-table 'lows forty-five minnits at Gabbert's, so the critters kin pick a bit. Wal, we grubbed—an then kem the fun. The strange pilgrim did it. The funniest galoot! You'd orter jest see him! All rigged up in stove-pipe hat, b'iled shirt and shiny boots—you could see to shave in 'em. Smelt louder'n a polecat—little sweeter, though. He was a high-toned snoozer, you bet! But you'll all see fer yourselves, sence he 'lowed to locate in Windy Gap.

"After we'd done ett our grub, the next thing in course was a call on Dutch Frank, at the bar, fer a stomach-acher. Vinegar Sol he 'vited the stranger to jine—I reckon he t'ank he'd ketched a sucker. We nominated whisky, an' while Sol was givin' a sentiment, the strange pilgrim axed fer a glass o' water. Dutch Frank opened his eyes, but filled the bill. Stranger he tuck an' made his grog half-an'-half—jest enough to spile both; too strong fer water an' too weak fer pizon.

"You fellers knowed how Dutch Frank was—mighty like gunpowder—easy to 'splode, an' when he *did* go off, somebody was mighty apt to git hurt. I looked fer a row, instanter. I saw Dutch's eye begin to snap, his ha'r to bristle, an' that big under lip to stick out—but you knowed how he was when rubbed ag'inst the grain, or anybody cast 'flections on his licker.

"Stranger didn't 'pear to notice nothin', but swallowed 'bout hafe of his pizon. Then he tuck the glass o' water an' walked to the door, pullin' a little white handled brush outen his pocket—somethin' like a young ha'r-brush—an' then, dog my cats, ef he didn't begin to wash an' scrub out his mouth, a-makin' the most owdacious faces—wuss'n a 'possum, chawin' on a green persimmon! 'F he didn't, hope may die!"

At this stage of his story, Ginger Dick paused long enough to glance around upon the faces of his audience, and then, as if satisfied that they fully appreciated the enormity of the "strange pilgrim's" offense against the rules of common politeness, he took his "three fingers straight" before proceeding.

"You know how quiet Dutch Frank had grōwn, sence he'd fit his way to the front rank an' stood cock o' the walk. Everybody knowed the stuff he was made of, an' so thar wasn't no need o' his showin' his teeth whenever a human sneezed cross-eyed at him, like thar used to was. But he couldn't stan' this, nohow. 'Twas bad enough to leave a glass hafe full, but fer a critter to go an' scrub his mouth out, to git shet of the taste—'twould 'a' made old Gabriel quit tootin' his horn an' use it fer a club—'twould so!"

"Dutch wasn't no angel—I reckon that's past 'sputin'. He lepped over the counter an' grabbed the stranger, like he would shake 'im to bits. But he didn't—no, not muchly. I don't rightly know what the pilgrim did, nur how he did it, but he kinder straightened up—an' then Dutch Frank wa'n't thar no more! 'Stead, he lay under the bar, a-quiverin' all over jest like when you knock a hog on the head with an ax.

"The stranger? *Click-click!* an' thar he stood, leanin' ag'inst the door-post, a-squintin' at us over a pepper-box. I ain't much of a coward—ef I do say it myself—but at jest that point I wished I was a mouse with a big knothole 'ithin easy reach—I did so!"

"Is this a single-handed match, gentlemen, or air I to play a lone hand ag'inst the crowd?"

"The pilgrim said this, his voice soundin' clear, but low an' soft as a woman's, an' we could see the white teeth under the black ha'r on his upper lip, jest like he was a-laughin' at us. But Vinegar Sol he spoke out, like he was in a hurry:

"We pass, stranger—it's you an' Dutch Frank fer the pot."

"Good enough! I don't know what the fool has ag'in' me, but you take an' set him on his pins, an' then ef he wants any change fer the little love-tap I lent him, jest tell him I'm waitin' outside."

"A love-tap—that's what *he* called it! A good healthy mule kick wasn't a patchin'. Thar was a black lump on Dutch's throat big's a punkin, an' still a-swellin'!"

"It tuck nigh a pint o' whisky to fetch the critter to. When he could fairly stand alone, he shuck us off. You should 'a' see him then! It made me creep clean down to my boots, an' I got ready to dodge. Not that he acted so wild an' keerness like most men do. No, he was too mad fer that. His face, all but that black lump, was white as a dead critter's. His eyes looked like two holes, with a fire burnin' 'way back in 'em. Durned ef I didn't feel my skin crack an' shrivel when he looked at me!

"He looked as though he wanted to speak, but couldn't. He opened his mouth, but we couldn't make out nothin' but a deep growl like—more like a grizzly b'ar when his Ebenezer is riz than anythin' human. We onderstood what he wanted, an' Keno Dan spoke up.

"He said he'd be outside, ef you wanted any more. Best go round by the back way, fer he may be a-layin' fer ye."

"But Dutch wouldn't hear to reason. He drawed, an' made jest one jump out-doors into the open. Then kem the voice o' the stranger, an' we made out the words:

"Halt! thar—I've got the drop on ye, an' the first step you make, afore I'm done talkin', down ye go, a dead man!"

"We couldn't wait no longer, so out we lepped to see the fun. It's hard to b'lieve—I wouldn't 'a' b'lieved it myself ef I'd bin alone, but the boys kin sw'ar to it. Thar was Dutch Frank, standin' like a stone, his pistol half-raised, jest as though he was under a charm, like. The stranger was squatted

on a bucket, drawin' a bead on Dutch, lookin' jest as coo an' sweet as buttermilk. He nodded to us, as though to tell us to clear the track, so's to give 'em elbow-room, then spoke to Dutch:

"You pitched onto me, unprovoked, an' I reckon you kinder run ag'inst a snag. So fur we're even. Ef you want anything more, I'm the man fer your money. But I claim to be a gentleman. We have plenty of time; then le's do this job up in style. Are you 'greeable?"

"Dutch didn't *look* very 'greeable jest then—'minded me of a bull-dog what'd jest bin licked like thunder fer chawin' a hog—but he grunted out somethin', an' the stranger lowered his weepin. I looked fer Dutch to plug him—but he didn't. You never see'd sech a change in a human critter. He was cowed—an' by a little slender feller which looked like Dutch could take an' break in two 'crost his knee.

"Good enough! you ain't sech a fool as you look,' an' the stranger laughed out loud; soft an' clear, it sounded like music, 'most. 'Pick out one o' your fri'nds thar, an' tell him to step off the distance you prefar, an' ax him to give the word. Then you cut loose an' shoot your level best, fer I warn you that I mean business. When owdacious critters put their hands on me, the chances air that they git burnt—*bad!*"

"The words don't sound much now, when I speak 'em, but they cut like a knife from *his* lips. An' Jumpin' Jack he said in my ear that he'd go two to one that Dutch wouldn't pass out no more p'izon in *this* kentry. I b'lieve Frank hed some sech idee himself, he acted so queer—jest like a man in a dream. But he axed Vinegar Sol to mark off the distance—twenty paces—an' you know what a straddle-bugs *he* is. The stranger grinned a little, as he took up his posish; I reckon he thought Dutch was just a little mite skeered, but you know Dutch was good fer the size of a hat every twice at a hundred yards.

"Vinegar Sol gev the word, an' Dutch fired. I looked fer the pilgrim to drop; but he didn't. Thar he stood, jest like a rock, a-showin' his white teeth like he was a-laughin'. He hadn't even raised his pistol.

"Hold your place, thar, my man! he called out, clear an' sharp as a whistle. 'You owe me a shot, but I want to light up, fust."

"It sounds tough, boys, I know, but hope may die ef the durned galoot didn't pull out a see-gar an' strike a match, jest as cool as mush an' milk!"

"Ah, what're you givin' us?" sneeringly demanded a rough looking, red-haired giant. "Take us fer sardines?"

"Look here, Big Tom," sharply replied Ginger Dick, "I'm tellin' this yarn. You may 'sider yourself bully o' this burg but you ain't got no call to crow over me. Whatever I say I kin back up in any way you durn please. I saw this little a'fair, an' so did three other men, any one on 'em as good or better men then you *dar* be—"

At this juncture, when sharp words bade fair to culminate in still sharper arguments, according to the prevailing fashion, friends interposed to restore peace; not that they had any conscientious scruples against a little by-play between friends with bullets or steel, but they didn't care to lose the *finale* of Ginger Dick's story. A drink around healed outward differences, and then the stage-driver resumed his narrative.

"I said the stranger lit a match, but he didn't light his see-gar jest then. Dutch Frank was jest *more'n* hot, to see how he was bein' played with, an' give a yell you could 'a' hearn ten mile as he lepped forward, a-shootin' at every jump. The stranger dropped the match, flung out his arm an' fired. Durned ef I b'lieve he *could* 'a' took aim, but Dutch dropped his weepin with a yell. The bullet had mashed his right hand all to pieces.

"The little feller cocked his pepper-box ag'in, but Dutch Frank had got his fill, an' turned tail, runnin' like a skeered jack-rabbit, a-yellin' at every jump.

"Halt!" yelled the stranger ag'in. "Ef you pass the sage-bush yonder, I'll plug ye!"

"I don't reckon Dutch hearn him; anyway he couldn't hev understood what he said, fer he jest *more'n* humped himself. The sage-bush was over a hundred yards away, an' I'd 'a' bet long odds the little feller couldn't 'a' hit a runnin' mark that fur off. But he did. The minnit Dutch reached the line, he pulled trigger, an' throwed his meat cold—tuck him chug in the middle o' his head.

"Gentlemen," he said, turning to us, "gentlemen, air you satisfied? Ef not, now I've got my hand in, I'll be most happy to obleege any or all o' ye—one at a time."

"We was satisfied—'most anybody 'd 'a' bin the same, a'ter seein' the grit an' the way he handled his pepper-box—an' we told him so, too. He jest showed his teeth a little an' bowed, an' then, while we were lookin' after what was left of Dutch Frank, he loaded his pistol an' finished lightin' his see-gar. Then he 'vited us to jine him in a drink, which we did. The pizon didn't taste *quite* as good as this, but we didn't keer about 'fusin' jest then."

The patrons of the "Hole in the Wall" earnestly discussed the case in all its bearings, paying due attention to the black bottle, until the little red-faced man grew still more rosy, his eyes more fishy, and his tongue as nimble as those of his companions. Nor was the effect less noticeable upon Big Tom Noxon.

This man had a cheap-won reputation of being a veritable fire-eater, and had, in reality, been engaged in one or two street-fights since Windy Gap leaped into existence, through which he had passed creditably—as the times went. But his own tongue was his loudest herald.

"I'd like to see this wonderful critter o' your'n, Ginger Dick," he quoth, with a sounding oath. "I'll bet two to one that he couldn't run 'round here 'thout gittin' picked up."

"Who'd do it?" quickly returned the stage-driver.

"You see me? I reckon I could chaw him right up—"

"I've got money that says you'd take water quicker'n Dutch Frank did. Put up or shut up!" and Ginger Dick produced a heavy buck-skin bag of gold-dust.

"But whar's your man—show me your man fust."

"I kin do that easy. I don't reckon he'll be hard to find. Kiver the dust, or own up that you crawfish!"

"Crawfish nothin'!" and Noxon drew out a handful of gold-pieces, which the bar-keeper quickly received, after weighing out an equal amount of the dust.

"I don't mind tellin' you now, Big Tom, that the strange pilgrim is in this 'ere burg, where he 'lows to locate. Anyhow, that's what he told me. You mind—you're to pick a fuss with him, chaw him up or make him take water—or the stakes are mine. No foolin'—Talk o' the devil! Thar comes the very cuss now!" added Ginger Dick, in a whisper.

The next moment a light footstep was heard, and then the "strange pilgrim" entered the Hole in the Wall.

CHAPTER II.

BEAUTY IN DISTRESS.

"My last match—and a mighty poor excuse for one, too. If it goes out—bah! The same old luck! Well, it's good-by smoke until the old man comes, I suppose."

With these words—a mixture of discontent and philosophic coolness—the young man resumed his recumbent attitude in the grateful shadow cast by the gnarled and twisted red-wood, yawning lazily.

His surroundings were not very romantic. Upon every hand rose the rocky hills, gray and forbidding, dotted here and there with a "fired" shrub, or covered with a scanty growth of shriveled grass and wild oats. Many of the rocks were fire-blackened. Wherever the pickax or long-handled shovel could make an impression, there the dirt and gravel lay in unsightly heaps, surrounding many an ugly hole and pit. It was as though an army of gigantic moles or gophers had been at work. Not very romantic, certainly; and yet Dick's Pocket had found birth in a halo of romance.

The story was a peculiar one, and a graver shade rested upon the young man's face as he glanced around and recalled the story as it had first met his ears, beside the cheering camp-fire, after a hard day's work in the gulch.

Little did he dream what a terrible interest that story was to have for him and his, in the time to come!

In the year '50, few men were more generally known throughout the gold mines than a tall, stately man who bore the singular sobriquet—"Gospel Dick." The title was honestly earned. Through the week he labored faithfully at gold-digging, and was accounted an unusually fortunate man. But when the Sabbath came, Gospel Dick substituted a Bible for a pick, and sought to interest his rough companions in the Divine Word. Though he reaped more ridicule than profit, he persisted, passing from place to place, until his name was familiar throughout the three grand gold regions of California: the Eastern Range, the Middle Placers, and the Valley Mines; and he won the respect of all, for they could but see that he was thoroughly in earnest and consistent in all his dealings.

One Sabbath afternoon he fairly electrified his rough hearers by a sermon of wonderful power and eloquence. And then he bade them farewell. He said that he had made a fortune by digging, and was about to return to his distant home, to rescue his family from want.

That was Gospel Dick's last sermon. When day dawned, he was found lifeless—well-nigh dead, bleeding from a dozen wounds; and his rich store of gold was gone.

The excitement was intense. Two men were lynched, on suspicion; but the gold was never found. Gospel Dick gradually recovered his strength, but his mind was a blank. He had only one idea: that of searching for his lost fortune.

One night he disappeared, and it was found that he had stolen a rifle, revolver and stout knife, together with the necessary ammunition. No one could afford time to search for him, and as the months passed on, Gospel Dick was almost forgotten. Then his memory was suddenly recalled.

Two prospectors came suddenly upon a strangely-impressive scene. In a basin-like valley lay two figures—that of a man and a huge cinnamon bear, locked in a grapple that even death had not separated. The fight must have been a furious and protracted one, for the ground was scarred and torn up for yards around.

A momentary gleam of pity for the unfortunate hunter—then a wild yell of joy! The bodies were lying literally upon a golden bed—nuggets of almost pure gold had been torn from their resting-places and cast into the sunlight by the furiously trampling-feet. The death-struggle had revealed a wonderfully rich deposit of gold—a veritable "pocket."

Hence came the name—Dick's Pocket—for the unfortunate was indeed the mad preacher.

The tidings soon spread—but not before the two men had secured a rich fortune apiece. Miners flocked to the "rich find" but numbers soon exhausted the golden store, though

not before Windy Gap was bunt upon the nearest available piece of ground.

Another discovery had been made. *Gospel Dick had been shot with a rifle-bullet through the back of his skull.* Experts declared that the shot must have produced instant death. Who, then, was the murderer—the bear—or—?

The enigma had never been solved.

The young man was aroused from his reverie by the sound of a light footfall, and quickly raised his head; but the words that rose to his lips were never uttered. His eyes dilated with astonishment, and an expression of ludicrous wonder overspread his bronzed face.

In an attitude of startled grace, beside a fire-scarred boulder, stood a young woman, who had evidently just observed the young miner. In her hand was held a light, richly ornamented rifle, its muzzle thrown forward, her hand upon the lock.

"An angel in Dick's Pocket!"

The ridiculous exclamation fell almost unconsciously from the miner's lips, nor did he realize how odd it sounded until a clear, mellow laugh broke from the young woman. Then, flushing deeply, he sprung to his feet, and uncovered his head.

"Excuse me, lady—I thought I was dreaming. You came so silently, and the sight of a woman—"

"I can readily believe that, sir," said the girl—for she seemed still in her teems—lowering her weapon, and smiling brightly; "I can readily believe that, from the way you started. Only—I don't feel as though I was in anybody's pocket."

"Yet you are—in Dick's Pocket," retorted the young miner, joining in her laughter; and it was remarkable upon what an easy footing that blundering exclamation had put them.

"I believe I understand you now—and I'm glad to meet with some one who knows where I am, for I've been trying to find out that enigma this two hours."

"You don't mean that you have lost your way?"

"I fear so—but my friends must be near," she quickly added, with a half-doubting glance into his face.

"I know that I am looking rather rough, just now, lady," replied the young man, his face flushing as he rightly interpreted her hesitation. "Still, I hope I am a gentleman. If I can aid you in any way, I shall be happy to do so, to the best of my ability. I am the last man in the world to thrust my service upon anybody."

"I believe you, sir," frankly replied the maiden, extending her little brown hand. "My hesitation was needless, I feel assured—and yet, in this wild country, where so many lawless characters are to be met with, it was natural enough. I do need your assistance, for I must confess that I haven't the ghost of an idea of my whereabouts."

"I am pretty well acquainted with this section, and will gladly be your guide. You came from Windy Gap?"

"Some relation to Dick's Pocket? But seriously, I never heard the name before."

"I spoke of the town below. I supposed you were stopping there, as it is the only settlement within miles of this spot."

"No—we camped in a valley, father and I. There is a stream running through it, and just above us a good-sized waterfall. If you have ever been there, you must recollect the place. There is a large rock, with a tree growing upon it, that cuts the sheet of water in two parts. It stands right on the edge of the ledge over which the water leaps."

"I know the place—but you have wandered a good distance. The valley is five miles from here, in a direct line—twice that far by the route you must have come."

"I am a good walker, and wandered a good distance before I realized that I was lost. Then I ran a good deal—"

"In just the contrary direction, naturally—one always does," laughed the young miner. "Well, it was a fortunate mistake for me—no, don't misunderstand me," he added, hastily. "I am essentially a home body, was brought up with two sisters and innumerable girl cousins. Yet for nearly two years that I have been at the mines, I have not set eyes upon a lady. Women have I seen, but none that could remind me of home—until to-day. Can you understand this feeling? Let me make a confession. Last year I was mining near fifty miles from here. I heard some of the men talking about a fair and beautiful lady who had just arrived at Windy Gap—the wife of the hotel-keeper. I left my work and tramped clean here, for nothing else but to look upon a woman's face once more. But I didn't stay an hour. The fine lady was a painted, bold-faced, loud-talking being. I left Windy Gap that night. But now—the sight of your face has put new life into me, and I feel like a new man. It is like a glimpse of home. But—you are not offended with me for speaking so bluntly?"

"No," frankly replied the maiden, extending her hand. "It is a compliment any one might be proud of—and I'm not afraid to trust you now."

"Thanks—I shall never give you cause to regret your confidence. But—I've become a perfect bore! May I introduce myself? Mark Austin, from St. Louis."

"And I'm Edna Brand. Since all the preliminaries are settled, and you are so kind, hadn't we better be starting? I fear father will grow uneasy."

"I am at your service, Miss Edna—or should I say madam?"

"No—I am not married."

"I'm glad of that!" impulsively exclaimed Mark.

"Why so?" quickly asked Edna, her cheek flushing slightly.

"That's a leading question," replied Austin, in a grave tone, which, however, was belied by the mischievous twinkle in his

hazel eye; "and I might refuse to criminate myself. But you will not think me an impudent fellow, if—"

"I might—so we'd best keep on the safe side, and let the subject rest. You said there were two ways of reaching our camp; which one do you advise?"

Austin hesitated for a moment, which, after all, was only natural. While one trail was much the longer of the two, the other was more rugged and would offer more chances of assisting the progress of his fair acquaintance. The advantages were about evenly balanced, and so, like a true guide, he made an impartial statement of the facts.

"We will take the nearest trail, then," decided Edna.

"Very good—allow me," and Mark took possession of the light rifle. "You will find it difficult traveling in places, and may need the use of both your hands."

"Or rather," laughed Edna, with a mischievous glance, "you are afraid we may meet somebody and prefer to carry the rifle, lest they think you a captive to my bow and spear."

"There's many a true word spoken in jest, and this plaything is not your most effective weapon—"

"Bosh! excuse me, but really I couldn't help it. If you could only have seen your face then, as you uttered that flowery speech. It looked as though you hadn't a friend in the world, instead of having found a new one to-day. But, a truce to this nonsense, or we'll get to quarreling, and then I fear I'd find myself minus a guide. Come, now we have a bit of fair ground before us, tell me something about yourself. Is not that the rule when friends meet?"

"Then we are to be friends—real friends?"

"I trust so—for to-day, at least."

"No longer than to-day?" and there was genuine regret in the young miner's tone.

"It may be so—I fear it will. You will not misunderstand me. I never knew but one friend, in whom I could confide my little pleasures and disappointments; and she is dead now. I believe you would be a true, faithful friend, but it is not likely that we will ever meet again. I am here to-day—there to-morrow. I have no choice but my father's will, and he is never contented long in one place. We may resume our journey to-morrow."

"If you say that it will not be unpleasant to you, we will meet again, if not here, then wherever you may go. I have no ties to bind me to one place—"

"No—please forget what I said, it was very foolish, but mine has been a strange life, and no one has ever taught me to veil my real thoughts. We will part as good friends, but you must promise not to carry out your thought. Father is stern and suspicious toward all strangers—he has been deceived and wronged so often that he looks upon every unknown person as a secret enemy—and it would be very unpleasant for us all. You promise not to think of following us?"

"No—because I'd only break the pledge, and I won't even try to deceive you. You called me friend—I will prove myself worthy the name, if I live. But you mustn't ask such a promise of me. I like you—I want you to like me; but how can that come about if we are to part now, never again to meet?"

"I thought it had come about already," retorted Edna, with a little laugh, but her face was averted. "You say that you like me—I'm not ashamed to confess the same."

"But—I meant something more—"

"Seel 'the jumping-off place!'" quickly interposed Edna, as they came upon an abrupt descent, almost precipice. "I'm afraid you overrated your skill as a guide."

"No—this is the only point where we can cross the canon. Allow me—" and Austin gently lowered her to a narrow ledge some six or seven feet below.

Scarcely had he released his grasp, when Edna uttered a faint cry and sprung along the ledge. At the same moment Mark heard a loud snort, followed by the peculiar *sniff* that is made by only one animal. Edna, in her sudden affright, had passed beyond his reach, else he might have drawn her up out of danger. Realizing this, he dropped boldly to the ledge, holding the rifle ready for use.

Squatting upon the narrow shelf of rock, scarce twenty feet distant, was a huge cinnamon bear, its wicked eyes glowing, its yellow fangs showing between the red, dripping lips.

"Run along the ledge, Edna—quick! I will keep him back."

He had no time for more, nor to see that he was obeyed. Angry at having its rest disturbed, the bear moved forward, growling fiercely and showing its teeth. A struggle, with such scant foothold, could scarce be otherwise than fatal; but the young miner had no choice. He leveled his rifle and fired. But at the same instant the bear flung up its head, and instead of piercing its eye, the bullet merely shattered its lower jaw.

Austin dropped the rifle and drew his revolver. He only had time for one snap-shot, then the bear was upon him. Snarling fiercely, maddened with the pain of its double wound the brute made a furious stroke at the young miner, but fortunately overreached his aim. Struck with the stout forearm, instead of the terrible claws, Mark was flung against the perpendicular rock with stunning force. Yet he retained consciousness enough to cock and thrust his revolver forward until its muzzle was buried in the loose, shaggy hide. At the report, the beast gave a wild roar of pain, then its powerful arms closed upon the body of the miner in a terrible grip. With a gasping, gurgling cry, Mark flung himself heavily forward, and they fell over the ledge—down—down!

CHAPTER III.

"OLD BUSINESS."

"Up a stump—that's me! A critter that's follered so many false trails he's got so 'nation bad mixed up that he don't know his head from a hole in the ground—that's me, ag'in! Why cain't a feller lay down and go to sleep an' wake up to find things all onsnarled ready to his hand? Sugar in a rag! wouldn't that be gee-licious, though? F'r instance: here's me, little Old Business, in a minnit."

"I struck the Eastern Range, as they call it. I axed fer my man. Nobody knowed 'im—said so, anyhow. I scraped 'quaintance with everybody, his wife, cook an' poodle-dog. I drunk rivers o' rye, oceans o' Bourbon, chewed up hull cords o' black navy an' niggerhead; hugger-muggered with buggy Injuns, an' hugged thar squaws; ett rats an' dogs wi' China people; let big, black-mustached fellers turn my pockets outside in with their poker, monte—'you cain't tell which is the woman-keerd'—an' all sich little 'musements; did everythin' but chaw head-bugs an' horn-toads with Piutes. An' what'd I make by it? Echo sais in mournful 'cents—not a durned thing!"

"Then I tuck in the Middle Placers. 'Twas the same thing thar, only more so. Nobody didn't know nothin'—'cept one feller. He knowed too pesky much. He give me d'rections. I follered 'em. Traipsed forty mile—clum a hill that was so high the moon used to bump ag'inst its top every time it tried to pass by. Found the big rock—knocked—nobody didn't come. Knocked ag'in—same feller came what didn't come afore. Got mad—knocked the rock over. 'Twas all a dog-goned lie. Nobody'd never lived thar. That made me red-hot! Went back—chawed the feller's ear. Then tuck a fresh start."

"Struck the Valley Mines—an' hyar I am, a thousan' miles from bed rock, nigh as I kin tell. Not the fust sign o' a clue. Reckon I'll hev to try the moon next—mebbe he's tuck a r'y'ge thar—be jest my luck—'twould so!"

In a narrow valley—almost canon—was seated the man from whose lips, as if unconsciously, fell this peculiar soliloquy. Leaning against the perpendicular rock, clasping both knees with his hands, pulling at a black, stumpy clay pipe, in short, decisive whiffs, an expression of comical disgust rested upon the old man's features, in perfect keeping with his speech.

Of his figure, little could be told, he was so doubled up. A greasy skin cap—round as a ball—covered his head. From beneath it hung a shaggy mat of dingy gray hair, mingling with a long, heavy beard, white at the sides, but plentifully besprinkled in front with tobacco-juice. His eyes were rather small, but keen and bright as diamonds. His garb was a rude mixture of skin and woolen, dirty and greasy, patched and ragged. A short, heavy rifle leaned against his shoulder; a long knife and two revolvers were at his waist. The weapons at least had not been neglected, and were evidently well worth the care bestowed upon them.

Suddenly his attitude changed. His eyes dilated, his head was lifted and the pipe lay idly between his teeth. A faint murmur as of human voices in conversation came to his ears, though he was unable to distinguish the words.

Then came other sounds; a cry of terror, followed by another of warning; several shots, fierce growls and snarling cries; and then a dark mass shot swiftly before his eyes, falling upon the moss-covered rocks with a dull, sickening thud.

"Butter in a gourd! that's a nice way to git down-stairs! Hornets up a trowsers leg—let up thar, you overgrown galoot! Don't ye know better—won't, eh? Then hyar goes for your meat-house—up to Green river!"

A man and bear, locked in a death-grapple, had fallen into the canon or defile, from the ledge above. Though the fall had been down full thirty feet, and the bear had been undermost when the bottom was reached, the shock appeared to have affected it but very slightly, if at all. Whirling over, it sought to tear the throat of its prey; but its under jaw was useless.

Springing forward, the hunter attacked the furious beast, knife in hand, and twice planted his long blade to its very hilt in the animal's side. With a frightful roar of pain, the bear turned to face his new enemy, who, with an activity astonishing in one so aged, bounded back to where his rifle lay, and checked the mad charge with a deftly-planted bullet. With one stifed snarl, the huge brute sunk to the ground, its strong limbs quivering in death.

Mingled with the echoes of the rifle-shot was a clear, long-drawn cry. The hunter started as an answering cry sounded from the ledge directly above him. He distinguished the words:

"I am here, father—come quickly!"

With a strange expression upon his face, the old man glided quickly out from the rock-wall, until he could command a view of the ledge above. He caught a glimpse of a slight figure standing upon the shelf—the figure of a young woman. At that instant she turned and glanced anxiously down into the defile, her features pale and agitated.

Almost simultaneously the head and shoulders of a man protruded over the upper escarpment, directly above the maiden. In an angry voice he began:

"What the deuce possessed you to run away—"

The sentence was never concluded. A sharp exclamation and sudden movement of the hunter below arrested the newcomer's attention, and their gaze met fairly. A change passed over the face of each of the men. That of the old

hunter expressed doubt and indecision; the other betokened terror.

"Quick, girl—give me your hands!" gasped rather than spoke the man above, as he rudely, almost fiercely, clutched the maiden and drew her up from the ledge.

It was swiftly executed, and the couple disappeared almost ere the old hunter divined the man's purpose. A sharp cry broke from his lips and he sprang forward as if to pursue, but then he paused, with a backward glance at the motionless form of the young miner. There was an evident struggle in his mind, but humanity finally conquered.

"The trail 'll keep, an' I may be mistook, a'ter all. 'Twas only a glimpse, an' fifteen years is a long time. Yas, it'll keep, but this feller—Green persimmons in a 'possum's jaw."

The exclamation was one of intense surprise, caused by the sight of the senseless man's face as he gently rolled him over. Evidently the parties had met before.

"Glory to—butter an' aigs! The critter ain't dead yit! Mark—Mark Austin, 'f ye ain't dead, speak to a feller an' tell him so. Whisky in a rubber bottle—that's the stuff, a'ter all."

Muttering incoherently, the old man produced a flask of liquor and set about restoring the wounded miner, but with only partial success. Austin did open his eyes, for a moment, but after a brief, vacant stare around, his head sunk back and he swooned again.

An anxious expression rested upon the old hunter's face, as he hurriedly inspected the miner's wounds. They looked serious. Though the jaws of the bear had been disabled, his long, sharp claws had not been idle. One thigh had been laid open from hip to knee; his breast and side were torn and deeply scratched.

"He'll bleed to death in a' hour, ef them cuts ain't 'tended to. I must git him down to camp, 'f I bu'st fer it."

Muttering thus, the old hunter managed to raise the lifeless form upon his back, and then set off down the defile at a lively pace, betraying a wonderful degree of strength and endurance in one so aged.

But he was not permitted to progress far without interruption. He had traversed the canon and was passing along what seemed an old watercourse, now dry and baked by the rays of the fervent sun. The course was a direct one for nearly two hundred yards. An active man might have scaled the nearly perpendicular banks, if unincumbered; but there was no cover to be found nearer.

Bending low beneath his burden, the old hunter did not notice that a tall, roughly-dressed man was standing directly before him, in the old watercourse.

"Halt! there—what are you doing with that body?" he uttered in a clear, sharp tone, and a significant *click-click* emphasized his words.

"Butter in a gourd! Git out, 'e pesky fool—don't point that popgun this-a-way! S'pose it'd go off—"

"Ha! that's Mark Austin—murderer, I'll—"

The rifle was brought to a level, and the fate of the old man seemed sealed. But a quick wit and ready invention stood him in good stead in this emergency.

Wheeling quickly around he squatted to the ground and bowed his head low, thus using the body of young Austin as a shield. Slightly moving one of the wounded man's arms, he peered cautiously back at the red-shirted miner, who, disconcerted by the sudden unexpected move, had partially lowered his rifle.

"E durned fool—don't ye got no sense, at all?" cried the old hunter, sharply. "Cain't ye see this pore boy is a-bleedin' like a stuck hog? D'y' want to keep me hyar ontel he goes up the flume?"

"You killed him—"

"Stranger, that's a durned lie. Fu'st the boy ain't dead; next, I'd hev ye know that I, Old Business in a minnit, ain't in the man-killing business, jest at present."

"That's my friend and partner—Mark Austin," replied the miner, advancing rapidly. "I love him as though he was my own son, and if you have injured him, better—"

"All right, boss," and Old Business, as he quaintly termed himself, rose erect and faced the miner without sign of uneasiness. "I reckon the boy 'd a' bin 'pletely chawed up ef it hadn't bin fer me. You kin see it's the work of a b'ar—but while we're gabbin' hyar, the pore boy is a-bleedin' to death."

"Give him to me. Do you follow this valley—two miles below here you will find a brush shanty. That's ours. Git some rags—"

"I know the place—an' whar to git some salve as 'll heal 'em up quicker'n a cat kin wink—Holy Moses! drat the hole!"

Hastily picking himself up, the hunter started down the valley at a wonderful speed, while the miner, carrying Mark as tenderly as a mother her baby, followed him as rapidly as possible, nor did he pause for rest until he met the returning messenger, bearing a couple of ragged white shirts and a large handful of triangular-shaped glistening leaves.

"Lay him down—strip off his duds—then chaw these leaves like you was old Neb—grass-eater."

Setting the example, Old Business soon had Mark's wounds plastered over with the slimy pulp, and then neatly wound the cloths around all. While thus engaged, the miner, who had already given his name as Lafe or Lafayette Pike, was busied in making a rude litter, cutting down a couple of slender poles and laying branches across. Gently lifting the still unconscious man upon the litter, they raised the burden and waded on to the rude brush-cabin.

Pike closely questioned Old Business as to how the accident had occurred, and received a tolerably satisfactory answer, though the hunter never once mentioned the fact that Mark had been accompanied by a beautiful young woman, nor a word of the dark-faced man who had so abruptly hurried her away.

When Mark was deposited upon the rude pallet in one end of the hut, and, after calling in a faint voice for a drink of water, had sunk into a deep sleep of exhaustion, Pike for the first time took a good look at the face of the stranger. Their eyes met squarely, and the expression of each face gradually changed. Pike seemed the most agitated; in his eyes was a look almost of fear—such as one may see in the eyes of a hunted and cornered animal.

"You look tired, fri'nd," quietly uttered Old Business. "Better set down an' take a rest."

"Who—who are you?" muttered Pike, his voice sounding strained and unnatural.

"A man—like yourself. Didn't take me fer a woman-critter, did ye? 'F ye mean what's my name, that ye're welcome to; Old Business—that's my name an' my natur'. What do I do? A leetle o' everythin'. Jest now I'm huntin'—an' I reckon I've struck two big trails, this day. Good-by—I'm gone," and he abruptly left the hut.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PILGRIM CREATES A SENSATION.

A DEAD silence fell over the little knot of Windy Gapers as the subject of their conversation entered the saloon. Their bronzed, heavily-bearded faces wore that silly, half-guilty look which speaks so much plainer than words, and the newcomer must have been blind indeed if he did not read their conscious looks aright.

Be that as it may, he appeared quite at ease. He paused beside the counter, leaning against it in an attitude of careless grace, as he glanced keenly around upon the company, a half-smiled upon his mustached lip.

The first sensation of the Windy Gapers was one of surprise that a man like this had been able to cow burly Dutch Frank, who, for two years past, had been acknowledged champion of the road—either in "rough-and-tumble" or the more gentlemanly accomplishment of trigger-pulling.

As the "strange pilgrim" was destined to play no unimportant part in the history of Windy Gap, a brief description of his personal appearance may not be amiss.

But little if any above the medium height of man, at first glance he appeared a mere stripling in contrast with the brawny specimens of humanity whom he now confronted. But a close observer would have noted the clean limbs, the deep, well-rounded chest, the lithe, panther-like grace of every movement, the just proportion of every member, and would have coincided with the verdict of Ginger Dick—he was just built from the ground up!

From beneath the glossy beaver hung crisp, curling locks of a jetty hue, reaching to his shoulders. A small, neatly-trimmed mustache shaded the firm, red lips, now parted just enough to reveal a glimpse of the even, white teeth. His features were almost sternly regular, rendered even more severe by the dead-white of his skin. His eyes were large, black as a coal, but their expression was hard and defiant. This, together with the twin lines that ran down from each corner of his mouth, gave a chilling, disagreeable expression to an otherwise perfect face.

His dress would have met with approval on Broadway, but seemed strangely out of place in this wild, lawless region, where donning a clean flannel shirt was considered "putting on style," and wearing one's pants over one's boots a sure symptom of big-headism. A suit of black broadcloth, a white Marseilles vest, a daintily-embroidered shirt with sparkling diamond studs, lavender kids upon a hand that would not have disgraced a woman; these, with thin, patent-leather boots upon a small, high-arched foot, completed the "pilgrim's" toilet.

As Big Tom Noxon took in these details at a glance, he uttered a short sniff of disgust and drew his gigantic frame erect, casting a glance upon Ginger Dick which said, plainly as though expressed in words:

"This is the baby you pit against me!"

But Ginger Dick appeared in nowise disconcerted, though he had made a wager that few stage-drivers could afford to lose. Instead of quailing beneath the scornful glance, he advanced and greeted the stranger with a rude, native grace, and said:

"Evenin', stranger. I war jest tellin' the boys hyar 'bout you an' Dutch Frank. Gentlemen," he added, turning so as to face his comrades, "this is my fri'nd."

"Thanks," said the stranger, bowing as he grasped the proffered hand. "Friends are not so plenty in this world that one more need be unwelcome—and you look like a man to be counted on. But come—I'm dry. Gentlemen, will you honor me with your company?"

As a speaker, the strange pilgrim was voted a success—particularly in his peroration. As one man the company ranged themselves along the bar, where their glasses were filled in a twinkling, Big Tom with the rest.

His bronze face flushed a shade deeper as he caught the keen, gray eyes of Ginger Dick fixed upon him with a quizzical expression, and the glass of liquor was replaced upon the bar with a sharp thud that called all eyes toward him. Contracting his shaggy brows, Noxon returned the glance of the stranger with a dogged stare.

"You don't drink, my friend."

"No, I don't drink. I reckon my mouth's my own."

"I don't wish to claim it, I'm sure," and at the light laugh, Big Tom's face flushed deeply and his blue eyes began to glow. "But, excuse me—perhaps you are indisposed?"

"'F you mean by that 'at I'm sick, I ain't, not by a durned sight. I ain't that kind of a critter. I'm well enough, al'ays, to jest nat'ally chaw up any man who 'tempts to put on style over me, you hear me?"

"We wasn't talking of putting on style, nor yet of 'chaw-in' up.' I simply asked if you were indisposed," quietly replied the stranger, daintily sipping his liquor.

"An' I told you no, I wasn't," added Big Tom, doggedly.

"Good enough! But I'm not deaf. No one is going to force your inclinations—only—Gentlemen, I don't know what the rules and regulations of polite society may be in *this* burg, but where I hail from a man is expected to drink when invited—or else give his reasons."

"That's far diggers law the world over!" cried Ginger Dick.

"'F you don't like the whisky, I'll drink it for ye," confidentially whispered the little red-faced man, sidling up to Big Tom.

"You puckachee, or I'll lend ye one as 'll put a stop to your swillin' till kingdom come!" cried Noxon, so threateningly that the little man retreated until he stumbled over a rude stool and measured his brief length upon the floor.

"You heard me, friend?" politely insisted the stranger.

"Yes, I hearn ye—what of it?" growled Big Tom, sharply.

"I invited you to join us—you decline. Is it because the company is distasteful to you?"

"Comp'ny's all right—'cept one."

"And that one is—?"

"A fool'd orter guess that by this time, 'ithout axin' no more questions. But, sence you *won't* see the point, I'll spit it out, in plain English. I don't like your looks, nor I won't drink with ye, nuther—so thar!" and Big Tom drew himself up defiantly, one hand resting upon his hip, in close proximity to the heavy "navy."

Long experience had taught the Windy Gapers what to expect after such a blunt speech as this, and as one man they drew aside, leaving the two men confronting each other, with nothing between them but the length of the bar. Though they backed away from the counter, none of the party committed that mistake which has resulted fatally in so many bar-room fights. Instead of turning and making a blind rush for more congenial quarters, they kept facing the disputants, ready to elude any unwelcome missile, knowing full well that more men have fallen with a bullet in the back, while seeking to leave rivals a clear field, than those more immediately interested in the dispute.

Not a little to their surprise—for after what Ginger Dick had said about the strange pilgrim, a speedy settlement of the argument was expected—the gentleman laughed softly as he held up his gloved hand.

"My dear sir, there is no call for so much energy. My bearing is not impaired, and you might strain your lungs, which would be unfortunate. You say you don't like me; well, I've met others who held the same opinion. Dutch Frank didn't like me, either."

"That's jest the reason," eagerly replied Big Tom, glad to seize upon a plausible excuse for "crowding" the stranger, all the more eager that the pilgrim appeared desirous of smoothing the matter over. "That's jest what I've got laid up ag'inst you. Dutch Frank was my pard—we war thicker'n thieves together, an' thunk a powerful heap o' each other—we did so! You rubbed him out, an' I won't have nothin' to do with nur drink with you a'ter that. Now what ye goin' to do 'bout it?"

"I'm sorry—very sorry that you've taken such a settled dislike to me," slowly uttered the stranger, as he refilled his glass from the black bottle. "Now, on the contrary, I've taken quite a fancy to you, and should think we might become very good friends."

"Takin' water!" muttered Limber Vic, an ex-member of the sawdust arena who had abandoned the triumphs of the ring for the more exciting if less profitable life in the mines.

"You shet!" growled Ginger Dick, angrily, as he caught the glance of insolent triumph cast toward him by Big Tom as the stranger uttered his conciliatory speech. "Look at his eyes—you never see'd that look in a critter as meant crawfish. Keep your eyes wide open tight, an' you'll see fun in less'n three shakes—you hear me?"

"I don't want your friendship, stranger," quoth Big Tom, rather proudly. "I 'sociate with *men*, I does."

"Indeed! may I ask what is your idea of a man?" and the white teeth of the stranger again became visible.

"It's short an' sweet. A man *may*, possibly, let a feller spit in his face, but he won't let it be *rubbed in*. That's my idee of a man—you onderstand, stranger?"

"You speak plain enough, certainly," was the quiet reply. "If I was of a suspicious, irritable nature, I might possibly think that you were hinting at me. I don't know how I would act under such circumstances, since no man has ever spit into my face, much less attempted to rub it in. Very likely it would make me mad, though I claim to be a peaceable man. But let that pass. Instead, let me tell you a little story—"

"Oh, cuss the story—an' you 'long of it, too!" grunted Big Tom, turning away in disgust. "Ginger Dick, I reckon I'll trouble you fer that—"

"One moment, please—I really beg that you will listen to my story. It is a case in point, and I think you will be satisfied with me when you hear it."

Big Tom glanced over his shoulder, a disagreeable sneer upon his thick lips.

"You see it happened like this," continued the imperturbable stranger, still leaning carelessly against the pine counter.

"In '50 I was in Hangtown, and chancing to enter a sa'oon of course invited the gentlemen up to drink. They all joined me, except one—a big, overgrown lummo' with red hair all over his face—a face that would have disgraced a hangman. Excuse me, gentlemen, but you laugh too soon. You'll see the point in a moment."

"Oh, cheese it!" growled Big Tom, with an angry glare, for he more than half-believed the strange pilgrim was ridiculing him.

"He refused. I poured out a glass of whisky and pushed it toward him—just as I do to *you*, friend, and said: 'Don't you think you'd better drink with me, my good man?'"

The point was perfectly visible to all, now. Even Big Tom saw it. Without changing his careless attitude in the least, the stranger now held a glistening revolver leveled full at Noxon's head.

"Whar's the crawfish *now*?" muttered Ginger Dick, in an ecstasy of delight, as the Windy Gapers quickly drew to one side, all save Big Tom. He stood in his tracks like one suddenly petrified, staring blankly down the black muzzle of the deadly weapon.

"Easy, there, friend," and the change in the stranger's voice was actually startling; instead of the soft, almost drawling speech, it was now sharp and metallic. "I'm a nervous man, and if you force me to change my aim, I'm really afraid that this pistol might explode. I should hate to hurt you—I would, really, for I'm quite a woman in my dread of blood—it makes such a disagreeable mess. And yet—you will pardon me, I'm quite sure—I really have a curiosity to see you drink. Oblige me, barkeeper, by passing that glass to him? Thanks; come, friend, this weapon is heavy, and I'm getting nervous. *Please* drink that liquor."

"See you hung first, an' then I won't!" snarled Big Tom; but the drops of perspiration were trickling down his shaggy beard, and his eye visibly quailed.

"Bah! don't be a fool, man," and the voice sounded sharper and harder than ever. "Better a glass of whisky in your stomach than a blue-pill in your brain. Must I *insist*? Very well. I'll count ten, and if you haven't drank afore I finish, as sure as you're a living man now, I'll send you to join your dear pard, Dutch Frank!"

In a clear, distinct tone the stranger began to count. Despite his brute courage, Noxon could not withstand that cold, pitiless glance, and almost despite himself he raised the glass to his lips. But the first mouthful choked him. With a muffled snarl of rage, he plunged forward, striking out furiously with his sledge-hammer fists.

But the pilgrim was "up to snuff." Leaping aside he thrust out one foot and tripped the miner, at the same instant delivering a lightning-like blow with his left hand, directly upon Noxon's bull neck, felling him like a shot.

"Hurraw for hurray! the banty ag'in' the shanghai fer-ever!" squealed Ginger Dick, dancing around in an ecstasy of delight. "Stranger, your paw! You're jest the biggest little man I ever see—take somethin'?"

"No—thanks, all the same. I suppose yonder brute will not be satisfied until he has a shot at me—"

"'F he says a word we'll ride 'im on a rail!"

"No—let him run his tether now. He won't be satisfied without another lesson, and I like to have my business matters wound up before bedtime. Just soak his head in a bucket of water, and, when he comes to, tell him that he can find me in the open, below the town. He'll be just mad enough to shoot careless, and I'm afraid he might hurt some one in here."

With these words the stranger sauntered leisurely down the one crooked street of Windy Gap, which, by the way, at this moment seemed a misnomer, for no more than a pleasant breeze was astir, just sufficient to counteract the heated rock ridges that formed a rugged wall upon the north and south sides of the rude town.

Windy Gap, like hundreds of its prototypes, had grown in a single night, as it were, caused by an unusually rich "find"—of which more anon. The location was not a particularly desirable one. Upon every side rose the rugged, rock-crowned foothills—for miles around there was nothing but a succession of hills and hollows, frowning cliffs and yawning canons. Windy Gap was the only spot for miles that offered sufficient unincumbered space for a town. A narrow valley—not two hundred yards in width at any point—lying between two rocky ridges that stretched for miles to the east and west. Along this valley came the "ocean breeze" as well as the "mountain zephyrs," with a force that at times rendered pedestrianism almost an impossibility, that had brought more than one hastily-erected slab shanty to grief, and rendered real estate very unsteady—a man had only to walk from one end of the town to the other, in order to become possessed of at least two lots—one in each eye.

But the strange pilgrim was evidently not troubled by any such thoughts. He passed along like one entirely satisfied with himself and the world in general, until he had cleared the town; then he sat down upon a black boulder and lighted a cigar. A sudden yell from the distance caused a cold smile to

flit athwart his face, and he took a quick glance at his revolver—the same weapon that had sent Dutch Frank to his last account.

"The fool is coming. I think that *this* lesson will answer my purpose," softly breathed the stranger, as a bareheaded figure, closely followed by near two-score rough-clad worthies, came dashing through the town.

"Look out, stranger—he's goin' fer ye!" yelled Ginger Dick, in friendly warning—possibly remembering his golden interest in the little affair.

"You don't trick me *this* time, cuss ye!" snarled Big Tom, as he paused not twenty paces distant and leveled his revolver.

Standing erect, still smoking, a revolver hanging carelessly at his side, the stranger merely said:

"Don't waste your lead, friend, or you're my meat!"

Choking with rage, Big Tom fired. The stranger started slightly, but then bounded forward, swift as an arrow fresh from the bow, his revolver speaking at the same instant.

A yell of pain broke from Noxon's lips, as his arm fell helpless, his revolver exploding as it touched the ground. And the next moment the stranger stood almost within arm's length of him, his pistol at a level.

"Down upon your knees—down, I say! Down upon your knees and beg my pardon, or, by the living Eternal! I'll scatter your thick brains to the winds!"

For a moment Big Tom hesitated, but he saw that the pilgrim meant business—the steely glitter in the big eyes showed that—and then he sunk to the ground.

"You're too hefty for me, boss—I beg!" he muttered.

"Good enough! We'll be better friends after this. Now get up and have your arm looked to. Go to the hotel and tell them that you're my friend—that PACIFIC PETE stands the damage."

CHAPTER V.

A DISAGREEABLE VISITOR.

THE man who had so suddenly drawn Edna Brand from her position upon the rock-shelf clutched her tightly by the arm and dragged rather than led her through the tangled undergrowth and scattered boulders, ever and anon casting a swift glance backward as though anticipating pursuit. Nor did he slacken his pace until they were full half a mile distant from the scene of conflict.

"Now then, girl, explain," he said, in a harsh tone, as he paused beside an uprooted tree. "What were you doing on that shelf?—who were those men?—tell me everything that happened—quick!"

As soon as she had recovered sufficient breath to speak coherently, Edna obeyed, telling how she had lost her reckoning, the meeting with Mark Austin, his politeness and service as guide, and then the struggle with the bear.

"He was safe and beyond that frightful brute's reach, and might have easily escaped, father. But no—he saved my life—perhaps at the sacrifice of his own. And we—we fled without—Father, let's go back," added Edna, brokenly.

"Go back—and for what?"

"He may be dead—or perhaps badly hurt, and our assistance might save his life. How can we do less and still call ourselves human beings? Only for him, I would not be alive now!" she passionately exclaimed.

"Bah! don't be foolish. If he was hurt, his comrade can care for him. You never spoke of him—the ragged, gray-headed fellow. You ain't hiding anything from me?" he demanded, suspiciously.

"There was no one with us. I did not notice him until after you called. He must have been down in the hollow."

"Come—you are rested enough. I'll be afraid to take my eyes off you, any more, unless you give over this uncomfortable habit of making new acquaintances at every turn. You know that I don't like it—that I have forbidden your speaking to or answering a stranger. I have my reasons for this—good ones, too, and you *must* obey. I don't like to be too harsh with you, but—you understand?"

Edna bowed her head, but did not speak. It was evident that she *did* understand, that this rude speech was not the first one on the same subject. She made no further objection, but followed her father's lead with a listless, heavy tread, very different from the glad, elastic step that carried her so easily along the winding trail as she listened to the cheery, manly voice of the young hunter.

Eli Brand was a tall, well-preserved man, whose age could not have been less than fifty years. His features were good, his hair and beard still luxuriant, black as night, unmarked by a single silver thread. He was dressed in the usual mining garb: soft felt hat, flannel shirt, heavy trousers and cowhide boots. The belt at his waist supported a knife and brace of revolvers; in addition, he carried a heavy rifle.

Though, in answer to a former question of Edna's, Brand had declared that this was his first visit in the neighborhood, the perfect knowledge he now betrayed of the lay of the ground flatly contradicted his assertion. A stranger could not have followed that intricate trail without once pausing to study out his position. But Edna did not seem to notice this fact. Her brain was busy with far different thoughts.

"Here we are at last—thank goodness!" at length exclaimed Eli Brand, as they entered the little valley describe

by Edna. "And I'm hungry as a wolf, too. You make haste and cook—Hal!"

The figure of a man suddenly made his appearance at the door of the rude brush shanty. That he had been making himself at home was evident. A cigar was between his bearded lips; in one hand he held—strange sight in that wild, half-civilized region!—a beautiful guitar, and idly swept the strings as he gazed upon the couple.

His rich, fantastic garb—that of a native Californian, closely resembling that of the rich rancheros of the far South—harmonized well with his tall, athletic figure, his dark, fierce beauty. All in all he was the beau ideal of a Spanish cavalier.

As Eli Brand flung forward his rifle, the intruder frowned heavily, and raising one hand, he sounded a peculiar, sharp whistle through his fingers. The signal was not disregarded. Lowering his weapon, Brand advanced, though there was an ugly glitter in his black eyes that did not betray much love for the intruder.

"You let the girl alone, Juan Cabrera," sullenly said Eli Brand, as the Californian addressed Edna in a flowery, not to say stilted style. "Your business is with *me*, I take it. Edna, go get dinner—make haste, too."

"Yes, my business *is* with you," retorted Cabrera, as Edna entered the hut, and though slightly accented, he spoke unusually correct English for one of his race.

"Come down by the spring, then. We needn't let *her* know everything. You come from—?"

"El capitán—yes. He sent you this," briefly replied the Californian, producing a small envelope from his breast.

Brand's face darkened as he perused the few lines which the note contained, and a bitter curse broke from his lips. But then, catching the keen eye of Cabrera fixed upon him, he smothered his rage as well as he could.

"You know what this note contains?" he said, at length, and his voice, though low, trembled with anger.

"I have an idea," was the cool reply. "But I know what my instructions are."

"Well—why the deuce don't you spit 'em out, then?"

"Bah! you heretics—you Americans are so hot," drawled Cabrera, deftly rolling up a cigar, then spending several minutes in striking a light with flint, steel and tinder. "So! now we can talk comfortably. Well—I come from the captain."

"Say it once more and then sing it," growled Brand.

"Fetch me the guitar, yonder, and I will. But a truce to jesting. If I mistake not, in the note which you are treating so rudely, and which was written by our chief, Captain Vincente Barada, you have orders to accept what I am about to tell you as law—a law which you must obey in every particular, under penalty of— But you know the doom that awaits traitors. Am I correct?"

"Go on," was the sullen reply. "But don't push me too far—keep your sneers to yourself, or I'll lend you the blade of my knife."

"I thought you preferred the rifle—*guarda te!* Drop that—you see I don't play with a snake unless I have an antidote against its fangs."

Eli Brand sunk back and slowly returned the knife to his belt, cowed by the black muzzle of the revolver that touched his temple. Laughing lightly, Cabrera continued, but he still held the pistol ready for use.

"Speaking of using a rifle—that reminds me. It seems that some one has an interest in raking up that old affair. At least there have been inquiries concerning the party. I merely mention it to put you on your guard—the act of a friend, is it not? But there; to business."

"You came here in obedience to our master's will. He bade you wait here until he sent you further directions. It is for this that I am here now. Are you ready to receive them—and to obey?"

"You know that I must—curse you!" snarled Brand, chafing like a cornered wolf, yearning yet afraid to bite the hand that punished him.

"I wouldn't advise you to let the captain hear you speak in that tone. He believes in prevention rather than cure, and you know what our laws say in regard to traitors."

"Enough of this," said Brand, in a tone almost stifled by passion. "If you have anything to tell me, spit it out at once and in as few words as possible. Don't push me too far—don't you do it! Deliver your message and then leave—before I lose all control of myself—or I'll tear your black heart out for a gag to stop your sneering tongue!"

"Bah! am I a child? But as you will. Listen—and remember that *your master* speaks through me."

"You are to leave this and go down to Windy Gap; while there you can play any part you choose—a *padre*, if you will. Only you must be ready to *act* whenever called upon. The captain sends you this bag, for expenses," and Cabrera produced a heavy skin bag of gold-dust; "when that is gone, you will be provided with more. But bear this in mind: you are never to recognize one of our band, no matter what may be the circumstances under which you meet them, unless they first give you the signal. Understand?"

"Yes; what you say, but not what I am to do."

"You will learn in good time. One thing I can tell you now. You will find a man in Windy Gap, known as Pacific Pete. Keep an eye upon him, watch—"

"Hellow, strangers—how d'y? Glad to see ye—am fer a fact—sugar in a rag, yas!"

The words, uttered in a lazy, drawling tone, came from a little distance down the stream, and caused the two men to spring erect, with looks of surprise and confusion.

"Easy, thar—kinder easy!" cried the intruder, in a sharper tone, as he flung his rifle-muzzle forward. "Winegar in a hornspoon! You don't shoot all your fri'nds every time they drop in on ye, kinder social like, do ye?"

"Who are you—what do you want, anyhow? What right have you to sneak up on us in this manner?" demanded Juan Cabrera, his black eyes glittering.

"You couldn't pos'ably ax a dozen or so more questions, could ye? I like to take my things all in a heap. Hellow! looks like your fri'nd thar was sick; got the cramps, mebberful gripin' they be!"

"He's subject to such attacks; don't notice him, and he'll come out all right," quickly replied Cabrera, glancing at the ghastly face and trembling figure of Eli Brand. "He sees snakes, sometimes—you understand?"

"Don't I? Wish I had a dollar fer every bootful o' the pizon critters I've had," and the intruder chuckled grimly.

"Who are you?" gasped Brand, vainly striving to still his nerves.

"Jes' so. Sorry I hain't got no keerd—giv' the last to a Ute squaw, yest'day. Didn't 'spect to meet perlite comp'ny so soon, ye see. But my name's Old Business. I'm a travelin' sign fer a boss tailor-shop in St. Louey. Hyar, gentlemen, you see the latest style; jest out—"

"They turned you loose before you were cured, I should say," sneered Cabrera.

"You'll be turned off tight—'round the neck. They say it's sudden death fer a feller to be ketched now, a-borrowin' a feller's dust when he's asleep. Thar was a time when he stood a chainece o' gittin' off, even a'ter the noose war 'round his neck. Hellow! you sick, too? Air must be drefful on healthy in these parts."

"'Twill be for you, if you talk too much in my presence. If you're wise, you'll take the hint. Brand," and he turned abruptly to the other, "you will not forget? Lose no time, pull up stakes and strike the new claim to-morrow. Remember."

"A good-lookin' galoot," observed Old Business, looking after Cabrera as he strode away. "But he won't die in his bed."

"What do you know of him?" asked Brand, with ill-concealed anxiety.

"Not much, either way. But, you see, he's got a pink wart on his nose. That's a sign he won't live long. Then he stepped out with his right foot fo'most—a sure sign he ain't no better'n he orter be. You see how he holds his head on the right shoulder? That's a sign he'll wear a hemp neck tie, with the knot under his left year. I never knowed the signs to fail; he's meat for the vigilantes, sure!"

"Bah! you are not such a fool as you try to make out. And now, if you have no business with me, I'll not detain you any longer."

"A perlite way o' tellin' me to puckachee—thank ye. I'm lookin' fer a man called John R. Austin; that ain't your name?"

"No, it's not my name," snarled Brand.

"Never hearn tell on him, neither, I reckon?"

At this moment, Edna stepped to the door of the shanty and announced that dinner was ready.

"The best news I've hearn for a month. I kin eat—"

"Hain't you better wait until you're invited? Edna, what on earth—"

"Father, it's the gentleman! Oh, sir, was he hurt much? he wasn't killed?" faltered the maiden, her eyes sinking beneath the keen glance of Old Business.

"So—I thought I couldn't mistake that pretty face, though you did leave in a hurry, back thar. I jest caught a glimpse o' your face, but I knowed I'd know it ag'in. Oh, the young feller? He's all right—ain't hurt a bit. One arm chewed off, his head skelped, a' eye dug out—he'll be all right when we cut off his t'other leg, I reckon. Hellow! she's sick, too! Durn sech a kentry—more sick people then you kin shake a stick at! Git some water, quick, old man!"

Edna turned pale and would have fallen, only for the arms of Old Business, who raised her from the ground and carried her to the hut as though she had been an infant. Brand brought water, but it was not needed; and while he was gone, the old hunter took occasion to tell Edna the truth—that Mark, in all probability, would be upon his feet inside of a week.

Old Business evidently was bent upon obtaining a "square meal," and Brand's rather broad hints were quietly ignored or quaintly misinterpreted, until he finally accepted the situation, though with an ill grace. The unwelcome guest directed most of his remarks to Edna, and several times her artless replies caused Brand to frown deeply, until at length he burst forth:

"Look here, old man, enough's enough. You force yourself upon those who don't want your company, invite yourself to dinner, and make yourself as free with my things as though they belonged to yourself. I can swallow all that, but when you go to prying into our private affairs, asking all sorts of impudent questions—that's too much! You understand?"

"Father!" exclaimed Edna, flushing painfully.

"Thar, little one, don't bother on my a'count. I know jest what's the matter, 'cause I've bin thar myself. It's the quit-tin' off too short. You must kinder taper off, like, This is the nannygoat; take a pull, fri'nd," coolly quoth Old Business, producing a rubber flask of whisky.

"Do you want to insult me?" snarled Brand, his face livid.

"Jest look at that now! Good whisky as ever saw daylight—an' he calls it a' insult! I'm afeard you're in a bad way,

stranger. Miss, I'm a rough old coon, but my blessin' won't hurt you none. God bless you for your kind words an' kinder looks! I won't fergit 'em this while. Some time mebber you'll know me better. But let that pass. Your father don't pear to like me, so I reckon I'd better mosey."

"It'll be better for you," muttered Brand, almost choked with rage.

"You say you're better? Glad to hear it, fer thar's room fer powerful lots o' 'provement—thar is so!" said Old Business, as he stepped across the threshold.

Brand hastily drew a revolver and cocked it. At the sharp click, Old Business turned around, and lifted one hand.

The weapon dropped from Eli Brand's hand, and he sunk back, trembling like one in an ague fit. Then, with a quiet smile, Old Business strode swiftly down the valley.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GODDESS OF THE HORN OF PLENTY.

WINDY GAP was all agog. The long-haired, flannel-shirted miners were gathered in knots, in earnest conversation, composed for the most part of exclamations and sonorous oaths, interrupted at every other breath by a loud, discordant *toot—toot—toot-e-toot!*

A negro, black as ebony, of gigantic build, was parading the one crooked street, extracting a most horrible combination of diabolical sounds from a large ox-horn. His armor was a modification of that so unwillingly borne by Sancho Panza when his island-city was invaded; instead of tortoise-shell, the African was in a hollow square of painted canvass. What the artist lacked in skill was more than made up by the brilliancy of his colors.

Upon each side was painted "THE GOLDEN HORN OF PLENTY! OPEN TO-NIGHT!"

Upon the front was represented a woman with flowing golden hair, dressed in scarlet, green and purple, supporting a huge yellow cornucopia, from the mouth of which was flowing a wonderful stream of golden coin. Kneeling at her feet were a number of red and blue-shirted miners, catching the glittering shower in their hats, stuffing their pockets full, while one stout fellow who had filled the skin of an ox with gold was literally crushed to death beneath his load of riches.

Upon the reverse side were represented a pair of dice, a pack of cards, a faro lay-out and a roulette wheel.

Across the way—nearly opposite the Hole in the Wall—the saloon where Big Tom Noxon met his match in the new pilgrim, Pacific Pete—a good-sized slab building had been erected. Above the door was a transparency, bearing the legend—"THE GOLDEN HORN OF PLENTY. RUN BY PACIFIC PETE."

Our old friend Ginger Dick, in company with several others, including Big Tom, who still bore his right arm in a sling, were curiously regarding the building.

"We'll give 'im a red-hot house-warmin', I reckon," quoth Ginger, renewing his quid. "They say he's got it fixed up orful sniptious inside. Then thar's the female woman, too—mebbe we'll git a fa'r squint at her!"

"You've got the dead wood on us thar', Ginger," cried Vinegar Sol, enviously. "You driv' her cl'ar from Crooked Crick!"

"Yas, I did—an' what good 'd it do me? I couldn't git a sight fer my pile, nohow. Didn't I stop the stage twice fer to git inside an' look all over fer my pipe, which was in my pocket, safe enough, all the time? An' didn't she jest set thar like a bump on a log, her face all kivered up with that darned contrary black stuff? The most I could see war a pa'r o' eyes a-shinin' through the kiverin' like coals o' fire. 'Twas a dog-goned swindle—durned if 'twasn't!"

"Ain't she got a foot, though," chimed in Limber Vic, the ex-circus actor. "'Tain't bigger 'n my thumb. An' ankle—oh! git out—go 'way, sugar, you've lost your taste! I was standin' right hyar when she got out, an' her dress kinder ketched on the step. That knocked me."

"Thar he comes now—reckon you'd better turn it up," hastily muttered Big Tom, as Pacific Pete emerged from the new building and passed over to the saloon.

"Gentlemen, you will drink with me," he said, in his soft, low voice. "I want you to drink success to my new venture."

Even if their wishes had not been identical, it is very doubtful whether any one of the party, reckless, devil-may-care fellows though they were, would have declined the invitation. They had not forgotten the lesson given Dutch Frank and Big Tom Noxon, and had learned a wholesome respect for the new citizen.

Little more than a week had elapsed since that memorable day, yet in that time Pacific Pete had clearly defined his position in Windy Gap, and was already acknowledged "boss of the town," tacitly, if not in open words.

He had built a two-story house of rough, unplanned boards, brought from Crooked Creek at an enormous cost, together with several wagon loads of boxed goods. The inside of the building had been completed by workmen who had come by stage, and who departed when the work was done, with closed mouths that not even invitations to drink could open. Then, as the climax, a closely veiled lady, dressed all in black, came by stage, and entered the house without anyone's succeeding in seeing her face or hearing her voice. Nor had she been

seen since, though curious eyes had closely watched the house for hours at a stretch.

"You will drop in and see me to-night, gentlemen," said Pacific Pete, at parting.

"You bet! I reckon we want a grab at them dollars that yaller-headed woman's a spillin'," grinned Ginger Dick.

The sun had scarcely sunk to rest behind the western horizon when the transparency was lighted up, and the gigantic negro stood at the open door of the Horn of Plenty. The rush was impetuous at first, but the sable guardian withstood the shock as a mighty rock does the sullen rush of the ocean's waves, and only admitted the miners one at a time.

"Plenty ob time, gemmen, plenty ob time. De big horn won't run yet for a' hour. Marse gwine to make a speech first," said the African, showing his magnificent teeth.

The "amusement hall" was upon the first floor. After passing the negro the miners crossed a narrow vestibule, then pushed open a swinging door of green baize, and found themselves in the presence of Pacific Pete. Each man was cordially greeted, and it was truly wonderful how pat the gentlemanly proprietor had every one's name or *sobriquet*. A word of greeting to each one, coupled with a cordial invitation to make themselves at home—with a motion toward a well-loaded table covered with cold lunch and several huge decanters filled with amber-hued liquor. But the climax was when the sable waiter persistently refused the dust or coin proffered in payment.

"It's a free lay-out, boys," cried Ginger Dick. "Give the boss a little squeal, in token that we 'preciate it all!"

Pacific Pete bowed and smiled in recognition of the enthusiastic cheer, and then, in obedience to the call for a speech, he sprang lightly upon one of the green baize-covered tables.

"Order in the camp!" thundered Big Tom Noxon, who, ever since his memorable defeat, had been an enthusiastic follower of Pacific Pete. "Order—the boss is goin' to speak."

"I'll not detain you long gentlemen. After thanking you for your kind appreciation of my endeavors to please, I have half a dozen words to say about this outfit. You see it is a gambling-house. Of course, I've set it up in the expectation of making money—I'd be a fool if that wasn't my reason. But I'm going to act square with you. You'll find no brace game here while I run the machine. If fortune favors me, good enough! If not, I couldn't lose my dust among a better or truer-hearted crowd."

"That's worth three more, boys!" cried Ginger Dick, and three times three stentorian cheers were given in exchange for the compliment.

"One thing more, and I have done," said Pacific Pete, when the tumult gradually subsided. "I said that this outfit was to be run on the strict square. Yet, of course, some one is bound to lose. If any such person thinks he is wronged, all he has to do is to give the sign, step outside, and I'll be most happy to accommodate him in any manner. But I won't have any disturbances in this house while it belongs to me. The first man that tries to kick up a row, inside here, will go out that door, feet foremost, a candidate for a first-class funeral. I say this—Pacific Pete!"

"Another point, gentlemen. Sometimes it will happen that business elsewhere requires my attention. At such times my sister will be left in charge of this place, and I want it distinctly understood that whatever she says or does will be made good by me—in fact, you can just think of her as me, and govern yourselves accordingly. You understand? Good enough! Gentlemen, join me in a drink."

While the miners were thus agreeably occupied, a side-door opened and three men, neatly dressed in black broadcloth, noiselessly entered and seated themselves at the tables.

"Now, gentlemen," said Pacific Pete, "amuse yourselves as you please. If you prefer playing, the tables are now ready. I will drop in on you after a bit and see how the thing is working."

"Make your game, gentlemen," uttered one of the dealers, in a clear metallic tone, as he gave his roulette wheel a turn.

That was sufficient. Gambling is an epidemic at the mine in any country, but nowhere was it more so than throughout California, after the first year or two, when "gentlemen of leisure" awoke to the fact that "running a bank" was a shorter road to wealth than working the cradle and sluice. And crowding thick around the tables, the golden stream was soon at full tide and ebb, now favoring the bank, now the player. The gentlemen in black were now reinforced by others, who acted as croupiers, the variety and number of the bets requiring one's constant attention.

As though in obedience to an inaudible signal, the attendants arose, turning toward the upper end of the room, bending their heads low. A quick buzz passed through the crowd as following with their eyes the direction, they saw a tall, magnificently dressed lady standing beside the dealer's chair at the one unoccupied faro table. After making a low, graceful courtesy, she seated herself in a chair, unlocked a drawer and produced a "lay-out," then, in a clear, musical tone:

"Make your game, gentlemen!"

The miners could not believe their ears. Was this radiant creature about to deal for them. The very idea made them gasp for breath.

"It's the angel wi' the little foot an' ge-lorious ankles!" at length muttered Limber Vic. "Who'll back me up?"

"Ginger Dick—you bet!" promptly affirmed that worthy. "I only wish I had a hull gold-mine to fling in her lap—I do!"

"Gentlemen, make your—" began the lady, but she never completed the sentence as her eye became fixed upon two newcomers who had just passed through the swinging door.

One was tall, erect as a poplar, despite the silvery locks that hung to his shoulders, mingling with the heavy, patriarchal beard. The other, a young man, bore traces of a recent and severe illness. He leaned upon the strong arm of his comrade, like one whose strength had been overtaken. Yet his face was handsome—almost marvelously so, despite its pallor. The curling locks of chestnut, the drooping mustache, the large, languid eyes, the perfect form, rudely clad though it was; all made a picture well calculated to attract and fix the regards of a woman.

As the reader has doubtless surmised, the new-comers were none other than Lafe Pike and Mark Austin.

"What a glorious creature," broke almost unconsciously from the young miner's lips, and a bright flush mounted the cheek of the woman, as though she had overheard the words.

Nor was Mark's admiration misplaced. The lady dealer was indeed a glorious creature. She was tall and stately—just as one imagines a queen should look—her almost perfectly symmetrical figure, if anything a little too voluptuous—but when was that a fault in the eyes of man? Her dress, of rich crimson—almost wine color—silk faced and flounced with costly white lace, was well calculated to set off and display her charms. The low-cut bodice left her firm, magnificent bust only covered with flimsy, gauzy lace. Her snowy neck was surrounded with a circlet of diamonds, flashing and scintillating like the eyes of a serpent. Her wealth of hair, jet black and glossy as the raven's plumage, was coiled in a coronet at the back of her small, haughtily poised head. Hers was a face that baffled description. One might speak of the marvelous eyes, so large, so lustrous, so melting; of the red, ripe lips; of the dimpled chin, the satin smooth cheeks, just flushed with the blush of the moss-rose; of the even, pearly teeth; yet all this would give the reader but a faint, hazy idea of the glorious beauty that met Mark Austin's enthusiastic gaze.

The dark eyes drooped beneath his ardent gaze, and the woman signaled to her attendant, whispering a few words in his ear. He placed a couple of chairs directly opposite the dealer's position, then advanced and politely invited the comrades to rest themselves.

"Your cake's dough, Limber Vic!" chuckled Ginger Dick, whose keen eyes had not overlooked this bit of by-play, nor the brief but admiring glance that was interchanged as Austin seated himself. "Gentleman Mark hes got the poll this time!"

"Thar's enough tho' fer two," muttered the gymnast; but there was an ugly glitter in his eye that betrayed evil thoughts.

"Make your game, gentlemen!" again sounded the clear, mellow voice, and then came the soft sliding sound of the cards, the clink of gold pieces, or the dull *clump* as a heavy bag of dust was cast upon the turn of a card.

After a time the novelty wore off, and the miners had eyes only for their winnings or losings. Pike played with all the cool ardor—if the term be not contradictory—of a professional gambler. Not so Mark. He bet at random, and only removed his gaze from that peerless face when the rake of the croupier pushed a pile of gold toward him. For a wonderful "turn of luck" seemed to favor him. He won almost incessantly, until a large pile of gold lay before him. Yet the gold was not half so precious to him as the occasional glance from those marvelous eyes, or the soft blush that crossed the cheek, as the lady dealer noticed his ardent gaze.

One player—a huge, black-browed Mexican—now made himself conspicuous, cursing his ill luck, and even going so far as to hint that Mark's good fortune might be easily explained by the bank, were it so inclined. The lady finished the deal, then turned abruptly to the gambler.

"My friend, of what do you complain? No, gentlemen, leave me to deal with him. If any one interferes before I call for aid, he shall never darken these doors again. And you, sir, speak out. What are you muttering there?"

"I said this wasn't a square game—that you are in with that baby yonder, you —" and he added a foul epithet.

They were his last words. Quick as thought the delicate, ringed hand shot forward, holding a revolver. A dazzling flash, a sharp report, and the Mexican fell, with a horrible yell of agony!

CHAPTER VII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

INSTANTLY all was confusion. The altercation had been so unexpected, so brief, that the insult was given and avenged before any of the gamblers at the other tables realized that there was anything wrong. But then, hearing the sharp crack of the revolver, the wild, horrible death-yell of the stricken Californian, and seeing the group suddenly shrink back as the dying man fell in agonized convulsions to the floor, knives and revolvers were drawn upon every hand; loud shouts and curses, eager inquiries and hasty explanations that served only to mystify—all bade fair to terminate in a "free fight." One minute of this terrible confusion, then the wild tumult was quelled.

"Gentlemen!" sung a clear voice, musical yet sharp and cutting as a clarion note, as the form of the lady dealer sprang boldly upon the table, regardless of the golden stakes which were scattered in every direction by her long robes.

"Gentlemen, order! There has nothing occurred worthy your notice. I only punished a thieving, foul-mouthed cur as he deserved. Put up your weapons—I command it—I, Pacific Pete's sister!"

What no living man could have effected, one woman accomplished. As if by magic the weapons were replaced, and the wild, yelling mob became a set of quiet, almost sheepish-looking men. It was like the transformation-scene in a pantomime.

"We thought mebbe 'twas some galoot as had 'sulted you, ma'am," ventured the abashed Ginger Dick.

"So it was—but I can take care of myself. Yonder the brute lies, his lying tongue unable to slander an honest woman again. Still, I thank you, friends, for your ready sympathy. Hannibal," she added, turning to the gigantic negro, her voice unmoved. "Remove that carrion. Send some one with it to bury it—you return here, at once."

Her proud eye glanced quickly around the room. There the wild, burning fire in those wondrous orbs flashed forth anew, and the gamblers involuntarily started as they heard a sharp, double click, and saw that the death dealing revolver was pointed at the head of a dark-bearded man who stood close to the table.

"My good sir," in icy accents fell from her lips; "you have made a mistake. That gold is not yours. I beg you will recollect yourself."

With a faint, muttered remonstrance, the crestfallen knave slunk away, and luckily for himself left the room before the crowd of miners fully understood what was in the wind.

A wonderful change came over the proud face as the woman turned toward the spot where Mark Austin and Pike were standing. A soft light filled her eyes; a half-smile parted her ruby lips, and her voice was low—music personified.

"Pardon me, senor, but you have forgotten your winnings. Yonder *ladrone* thought to confiscate it—"

"Excuse me, lady," stammered Mark, his pale cheek flushing hotly beneath that warm glance, "I—I don't understand you."

"This gold—you won it fairly—it is yours."

"But I was only playing for amusement—merely to pass away the time. I don't understand the game—couldn't have told whether I won or lost. I don't want the gold—you keep it—"

"Sir! do you wish to insult me?"

"If he does, we'll jest nat'ally chaw him up 'ithout—" began Limber Vic, only to be sharply interrupted by the woman.

"Did I ask your assistance, sir? When I do, good; but until then, please don't interfere with my affairs."

"I meant no insult, madam," quietly said Mark. "If you take it in that light, of course I'll take the gold, though I still think it more than my rights."

"Thanks, senor," and the bright glance and bewitching smile made poor Mark's brain whirl and dance like a mad dervish. "I only ask that you will give me my revenge soon—not to-night, but soon. You promise me this?"

Mark bowed in token of assent. He had sense enough left to know that he would make a fool of himself should he attempt to reply in words. And then, aided by Pike, he stored the heavy weight of gold in his pockets, trembling and burning all over as he felt the lustrous eyes bent upon him.

"Brace up, lad," muttered Pike, in Mark's ear, as he noticed more than one quizzical glance cast toward them. "This riff-raff 'll think you're green, 'f you don't mind."

But Austin was just returning the bow and smile of the lady-gambler, and the words buzzed in his ear unheeded. He was like one under the influence of liquor.

"Come," added Pike, gently shaking his comrade. "Come, we'll have a drink and a cigar, just to steady our nerves, then we'll puckachee for home. I was a fool for letting you come out—you're all of a tremble, thanks to your wounds."

Seated at a small round table, the comrades smoked their cigars. Mark paid little attention to aught other than the strange sight before him—the dazzlingly beautiful woman dealing faro for a crowd of rough, uncouth miners. More than once it chanced that their glances met, and at such times the young miner's frame quivered like one undergoing a galvanic shock. His thoughts were not pleasant, despite the marked attention which the woman had paid him. He could not forget the terrible expression that filled her face as she confronted the insulter—an expression almost devilish—that caused a cold thrill to creep over him now.

"You're going to be sick—that's whats the matter with you," uneasily broke forth the keen-eyed Pike. "Come, we'd better be traipsein' fer home; mebbe the fresh air 'll brighten you up. It is pesky close in here."

Austin made no reply, but followed the old man to the door, when he turned and looked back, just in time to intercept a glowing glance, a bewitching smile and slight bend of the queenly head. He returned the salutation, then passed outside, drawing in a long breath of the pure, sweet air, like one who has just awakened from a troubled dream.

"Well, Mark, how d' you like it, anyhow?" asked Pike, as, arm-in-arm, they passed along the crooked street.

"'Twould kill me in less than a week!" was the impulsive reply.

"You ain't cool enough. I never see a man play so blamed keeless—or bold, which? An' yit it won, every turn. 'F I didn't know you was a stranger to the dealer, I'd sw'ar you was in cahoot! Whichever way you bet—'cept oncet or twicet when you bet *both* ways—that's jest the way the pasteboards *seem* up."

"I don't mean the playing. That was the first time I ever

entered a gambling-house, and, please God, 'twill be the last. But that—that woman! did you notice her?"

"Could I help it? Petticoats ain't so plenty in these diggin's that a feller 'd overlook sech a scroudder as this 'ne. She was jest old lightnin', *she* war. She laid out that greaser mighty slick, an' from the look in her eye, I don't reckon 'twar the fust time she'd throwed her meat, nuther. Still, she's a fine specimen—o' the kind."

"I felt as though some one had stolen away my train and put in its place a boiling tea-kettle, whenever she looked at me."

"Which was often enough! You kin go in on your face an' win thar, Mark, ef you like. But take a fool's advice an' *don't*. I've see'd a heap more o' this world then you have, my bor, an' I've larnt that the Golden Apples of Sodom—or some sich outlandish place—ain't the only things as air pesky nice to look at, but when you bu'st the skin—ashes, nur quinine, nor assafedity ain't a primin' to the bitterness an' onwholesomeness that's inside—you hear *me*?" and Pike drew a long breath over the safe delivery of this formidable sentence.

"I don't want to see her again—I hope and trust we will never meet. I can't explain it, even to myself, but she has a strange influence over me. I half-believe that were she to ask me to commit a crime—to steal, or even murder—I couldn't refuse, as long as her eyes were looking into mine. She frightens me—and yet, do you know, I feel just as though I could die contented at her feet, holding her hand—looking into her eyes—"

"It's the b'ar claws, boy—you hain't got over 'em yit. You ll laugh at this idee, when I 'mind you of it, a week from this. But I don't reckon we'll see her ag'in. 'Pears like I'm tired o' these diggin's, anyhow. Reckon we'll go prospectin' in a couple o' days, eh?"

"I don't know—halloa! we're not the only late travelers. Look yonder!" and Austin pointed out half a dozen dim, phantom-like shadows only a few yards before him.

"Edge in closer to the rocks," muttered Pike, earnestly. "Thar was a rough crowd back yender, an' they all knowed you made a big stake. 'F they mean mischief, stick clost by the rocks an' pay 'em in blue pills."

"Some fellows from up-country, come down to spend Sunday, I reckon, and got be—ha!"

"Halt, there!" thundered Pike, as the shadows moved closer. "You keep your distance, or you'll git hurt—*sure*!"

"It's them!" uttered a deep voice. "Heave in, boys, an' don't leave no botchwork to tell tales!"

"You'll git fiddler's 'lowance here, my bucks—more kicks than ha'pennys, a darned sight! You *will* have it, then?"

The robbers—if such they were—obeyed their leader, making a bold onset, but as though fearful of alarming the town beyond, they seemed bent on ending the little affair with cold steel. Not so with our friends. Their ready revolvers were out and opened play, the sharp reports echoing from peak to peak, the bright flashes momentarily lighting up the scene, revealing the two miners as they undauntedly confronted the long odds of three to one.

Foiled in their attempt at a surprise, the cut-throats now made use of their pistols, and for a few moments there was a lively fusilade. But night shooting is uncertain at the best—especially so when one is a target as well as marksman—and more ammunition than blood was expended.

Yet matters looked dark for the two honest miners. The enemy was gradually closing in, and a hand-to-hand struggle could end in but one way.

At that critical moment a report, louder and sharper than that of a revolver, was heard, closely followed by the words:

"Sock it to 'em—chaw 'em up! Cl'ar the track for the 'tarnal green-tailed galoot o' Squeedunk—which is *me*!"

All doubt as to the side upon which the new-comer meant to fight was quickly ended. With an ear-splitting yell he leaped into the midst of the cut-throats, swinging a heavy rifle around and scattering them like chaff.

"Come on, boys, we'll captivate the hull 'tarnal outfit! Whooray for our side. Sock it to 'em—up and down, right and left—turn 'em outside in—houp-la! *Down* you go, ef your skull was harder 'n the rock o' Gibraltar!"

Confused by the furious onset, deceived and bewildered by the shrill yells and shouts of the new-comer, the bandits broke and fled in dismay, leaving two of their number dead upon the field, while more than one of the others bore compliments which would not soon be forgotten.

"Thar they go—fit to run out o' thar skins! He! he! he! ho! ho! ho! But you fellers—how goes it?"

"I'm all right—and you, Mark?" anxiously asked Pike.

"Safe, and with a sound skin, I believe, thanks to this gentleman," promptly responded Austin.

"I think 'twas *you*," chuckled the opportune arrival. "Reckon you've got your life insured, hain't ye? First it's the b'ar, then these coyotes—"

"Ha! it's you?" cried Mark, springing forward.

"Yas—unless I was changed by the fairies when I was a suckin' babby—it's me, Old Business, chuck up to the han'le. Good boy! I'm glad to cross palms wi' you—darned if I *ain't*, now! But easy—le's take a squint at our meat, hyar. Don't reckon you've got a match?"

Pike was well supplied with the articles, and the bodies of the two men were closely inspected. One was that of the ex-gymnast, Limber Vic; the other was a stranger to all.

"They followed us from the Horn," said Pike, with a shrug.

"You bin buckin' against the tiger, I reckon. Didn't git chawed up much?" asked Old Business.

"Mark struck a lead—two of 'em, in fact," laughed Pike.

"Easy does it, old man," muttered the young miner.

"I won't say a word—she's a mighty fine—"

"What are you going to do about this? Take 'em to town?"

"They're dead—let 'em lay fer thar fri'nds. I reckon they'll come back when their skeer is over. I reckon we'd better be makin' tracks. We kin talk as we go. I've bin lookin' fer you two—on business. 'F you'll give me a shar' o' your shanty—"

"A share of everything—whatever I have is yours, my friend."

"I reckon I'll put you to the test sometime. Mebbe 'twill be to-night—or to-morrow, rather, fer it's that now."

The three men turned and strode away, talking earnestly, all unconscious that they were being dogged.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DELECTABLE QUINTETTE.

A BACKWARD step is seldom pleasant, but the nature of this, our story, requires that we turn back several hours—to about mid-afternoon of the day the evening of which was celebrated by the opening of Pacific Pete's "Golden Horn of Plenty."

Eli Brand was an honored guest at the "Metropolitan Hotel." Honored, because he rented—and paid for in advance—two entire rooms; because he drank champagne at five dollars a pin bottle; because he smoked fine cigars—for Windy Gap—and ordered whisky by the gallon; and because he "made hot love" to the gay and dashing—despite her forty years, her painted face, her padded figure, her false hair and her red nose—better half of the landlord, Mrs. Arabella Spriggs.

Eli Brand had sullenly obeyed the order conveyed him by Juan Cabrera, simply because he dare not refuse, though few men had more substantial reasons for shunning Windy Gap than the black-browed adventurer. Yet a week had rolled by without his being recognized, and Brand's fears were tolerably quieted upon that score. Yet whenever he stepped out of doors he was invariably "well heeled," and his keen eye roved restlessly about, as though expecting some ghost of the past to confront him at every step.

On the afternoon in question Eli Brand was entertaining a select party in his own room—so select that the doors were locked and bolted, the rude pine table being drawn up in the corner furthest from any other occupied room. Upon the table stood a box of cigars, a quart bottle of whisky, and five glasses. Around the table sat four men, busily engaged in sampling the articles, casting occasional glances toward Brand, who was slowly pacing the room, his head bent, his brow corrugated, an uneasy look in his eyes.

"Enough of that," the host cried, a sudden change coming over him. "Business first—get drunk afterwards, if you please."

"Look at that, now! An' is it *wan* little quart ye'd be afther tillin' us not to git dhrunk over? Whoo! an' it's Mickel Lynch is the b'y c'u'd lay out the bit bottle an' he never dhrav the long brith afther, at all, at all!" exclaimed a red-headed dwarfed giant, whose brogue—"the hair on his teeth"—placed his nationality beyond dispute.

"When your work is done will be time enough. I'll stand the racket for one day, though you drink enough to float a steamboat."

"You must have a deep interest in the matter, Brand," quietly spoke another; a fair-haired, smooth-faced youth, handsome as Sir Launcelot; another evidence that beauty is but skin-deep, for Frank Mason fled New York for the murder of his own father, and his exploits in California had richly earned for him the sobriquet "Devil's Frank."

"No more than you or any of the band here," was the quick reply. "But I'll tell you the whole affair, and then you can see your work. There is a man lurking 'round these parts who wants putting out of the way. Easy enough, you will say—but I don't know. The curse is a perfect devil—"

"Divil the one o' me 'll fight ag'in' the divil," hastily interrupted Mike Lynch. "It's bad luck, sure, to be—"

"The devil and you always fight on the same side, Irish, so you needn't be alarmed," chuckled Frank.

"Let up on your sparring—I tell you it's business first. And that reminds me our man calls himself Old Business—"

"I know him; a dirty, greasy-looking varmint, but with a' eye thet cuts clean through ye, quicker'n a center-bit," exclaimed a tall, gaunt worthy.

"The same. But let me go on. He is some kind of a spy or detective, I *think*, in disguise. Anyhow, he has got hold of some of our secrets. The other day—the first time we met—he made me hot, and I took a squint at him over a revolver, but before I could let daylight through him *he made the secret pass*—like this. You know that none but *proved* members of "the family" are privileged to use that sign, so, of course, I had to let up, supposing, of course, that he was some new hand, out on private business for the chief. You can guess how I was took down when the chief denied all knowledge of him, and declared that he was an impostor. Not only that, but he said this man must be put out of the way, *at once*."

"Good enough—far as it goes," quietly observed Devil's Frank. "But I reckon I'll 'pass out.' There are some men who are better pleased at having their orders disobeyed, and the boss is so full of his tricks—all in an honest way, of course—that I *think* I'll wait for a second dispatch."

"You've cut your eye-teeth, Frank, and so have I," laughed Brand. "That is the very idea that struck me. Of course I didn't speak as plainly to him as *you* did just now—he ain't that kind of a man. But I told him I didn't believe I could get boys to mind me; that I had no influence among them; would he just give me a word over his own fist?" and Brand produced a slip of paper from his breast pocket. "It runs thus:

"The family will obey the bearer in *everything*, until I publicly revoke this order. (Signed) VINCENTE BARADA."

"It's his fist, sure enough. That settles it, then. Well, what are your plans, since you are to be boss?"

"Simple enough. We are to *rub him out*, at the first chance. If I don't mistake, that will be to-night. I know that he is not far from here. What more natural, then, than he'll be at the 'opening' to-night. The news has been spread wide enough, and he must have heard of it. Well, we will be there, too. If he comes, we only have to wait until he leaves, then follow and wind him up. If we can take him unawares, good; if not, there must be no nonsense, because we are five to one. If he gets a good ready, we'll have our work cut out for us, sure. I'd near as soon tackle Pacific Pete, as this Old Business."

"You talk as though this was *new* business to us. I'm little, I know, but I'm tough, and if any one would like to put up half a dozen ounces, I'll play a 'lone hand'—"

"And get euchered, too, like enough. Easy, Frank; I know that you are a good little man, but this is an old chicken, and he knows how to use his gaffs. It won't do to have any bungling work; we must do the job up slick, and so quick that we can hunt our holes without leaving any trail. You know what talk is doing in Windy Gap—just the way it started in Wild-cat Gulch—and it may end here as there, in our losing half our men and having to puckachee in hot haste."

"We was sold out there," said the fourth member, who until now had not spoken a word. "'Twas all the work o' a bloody traitor, an' I'll strike his trail yit—you hear me? An' when I *do* strike it—wake snakes! I've got the wuth of a brother to take out o' the varmint's hide."

"You may be right, Black Jack, but I don't think it. The fact is, we had had our own way so long that we got too careless for our own good. But never mind that now. You all agree to carry out the chief's commands?"

An affirmative answer was given by each and all of the party. Then Brand added:

"That will do, then, for now. You can amuse yourselves as you please until the ball opens at the Golden Horn. Then you must be on hand, ready for work. Of course you're not to get into any game that you cannot drop at a breath. Well, here's luck to our chief and confusion to our enemies."

The four men were on hand promptly enough, and Eli Brand quietly seated them at the table that fronted the entrance, so that no man could enter or pass out without being distinctly seen. An ugly scowl passed over his face as Mark Austin and Pike Lafayette entered the gambling-hall, and he pulled the soft felt hat far down over his eyes as though afraid of being recognized.

But the hours passed on, and still their victim did not put in an appearance. Then came the sudden tragedy. The quintette was strongly agitated, even more so than the circumstances would seem to justify, for certainly bloodshed was no novelty to them.

Yet the explanation was simple. The Californian was one of their comrades, belonged to the same band, the members of which were bound by a solemn oath to avenge each other—to exact blood for blood; to carry out to its utmost extent the law, "eye for eye and tooth for tooth."

With a slight motion of his hand, Eli Brand signaled his men to follow him, and left the building. In a sheltered nook where there was no danger of being overheard, they put their heads together and earnestly discussed the subject. That they were greatly excited was evident, yet before they could arrive at any decision, they were interrupted by the sound of fire-arms, coming from a point at no great distance above them.

As with one accord the quintette dropped their argument, and with drawn revolvers, rushed toward the spot, with no other end in view than to see the fun and, possibly, take a hand in, according to circumstances. But they were too late for either.

"Halt!" cried Brand, in an eager but subdued tone, as a loud voice came to his ear. "That's our man!"

"What're you stopping for, then?" snarled Devil's Frank.

"There's other voices—he's not alone. We don't want to give cause for any more talk than is absolutely necessary. We'll dog him to his hole, and then stop his wind."

"I don't like such sneaking business; I'd rather folks 'd know who was giving them a benefit, when I tackle 'em," grumbled the youthful desperado.

"Yonder they are—striking a light! Look! that's our meat—the one with gray hair and beard."

"He's with Gentleman Mark and Long Pike. If they stick together, what then?"

"We must wait and take the chances. They're going, now. Follow me, and don't make noise enough to startle a weasel, or we'll lose our game yet. He's sharp as a needle, and quick as old lightning!"

These were the dark figures who so noiselessly dogged the trio as they left the scene of the cutthroats' defeat. And all unsuspecting of his danger, Old Business laughed and chatted as though he had known his companions for a lifetime.

CHAPTER IX.

"OLD BUSINESS" TALKS BUSINESS.

"You came just in time, old man," said Pike, as the trio walked rapidly away from the scene of bloodshed. "We was givin' 'em the best we knowed, but I reckon they'd 'a' tuk us into camp if it hadn't been fer you."

"Yes," chimed in Mark Austin, "you have doubled the debt I owed you. I only hope we will both live long enough fer me to pay it."

"I reckon I'll give yer the chaine afore long—an' that's jest the point I was wantin' to talk over with you fellers. I want your help, ef I kin git it; but mind, I don't want it fer nothin'. Ef you'll help me, I'll help you. Old Business is my name, an' business is my natur'. I talk right up to the bull's-eye. 'F you'll jine, good enough. Ef not, there's no harm did, and I kin look up other pardners."

"I don't know what you're driving at, but here's my hand—I'll stick to you through thick and thin, and set to work whenever you give me the cue," exclaimed Mark, impulsively.

"Wherever the boy goes or whatever he does, he an' I air pardners—that's settled," quietly added Pike. "Only, I reckon we'd better take a look at the lay-out afore makin' any big promises. Not that I doubt you, old man, but there's somethin' queer about you—'pears like you ain't just what you seem. I've a faint idee 'at we've met somewhar afore."

"Keep a-thinkin', and metbe you'll remember it all, in good time," was the quiet reply. "But I don't ax you to go it blind. I'll deal on the open with ye—but I reckon we'd better wait until we git to the shanty. It's mean talkin' in sech rough walkin'."

"We'll have plenty of time. To-morrow—or to day, rather, is Sunday, and we can make up lost sleep, if needed. I, for one, don't feel like sleeping for a week!"

"'F you did, you'd dream o' black-eyed angels in red dresses, shore!" chuckled Pike.

With only an occasional remark the trio trudged on through the dim starlight, following the winding, rough trail that led to "Dick's Pocket." And behind them, skulking along with the noiseless celerity of Indian scouts, taking advantage of every point of cover, come the five men, waiting only a favorable opportunity for dealing a treacherous, deadly blow.

The camp was soon reached. Situated in a hollow, surrounded by evergreen trees, with high rocks to break the force of the north and west winds, the shanty was a really comfortable place, though so frail and rude in appearance. Built against the face of a rock, of slender poles, covered with brush, it seemed a better shelter for beast than man, yet our friends found it very comfortable.

"Take a squat down, while I start up the fire. Then we'll nev a moutful to eat afore we go into the de-tails," quoth Long Pike, as he fumbled around and struck a light.

"I wouldn't go bad, and I've got a morsel o' raal mountain dew hyer, to wash it down," chuckled Old Business.

"The old man can discount you there, friend," laughed Mark. "He keeps a jugful of the joyful under the bushes, yonder. It's his medicine, and he never grumbles at having to take a dose."

"It's good stuff when a critter kin 'ford to give hisself up to the 'joyin' of it, an' nothin' else to trouble him. But it's pesky contrairy stuff when a man's got jubersome work on his hands. I've had this bottle nigh a week, an' it's sca'cely bin tetch'd."

Pike produced some cold bacon and corn bread, with a bottle of molasses, and, each man furnished with a dingy, battered tin plate, the trio ate heartily, winding up with a "wee drap o' the crayture," as Mike Lynch would have phrased it. Then, their pipes filled and lighted, a momentary silence fell over them. Old Business was the first to speak, seeing that it was expected of him.

"I reckon you fellers want to know what I'm drivin' at, don't ye? Kinder curi's like, eh?"

"Take your time; thar's another day a-comin'."

"Lucky fer us pore sinners which is a-wadin' knee-deep in the slew o' carnal c'ruption—oh-ah! 'Pent, feller sinners, 'pent afore the pizen tarantuller o' total depravity, with its ten thousand legs o' red-hot iron, an' its rattlesnake teeth bigger'n a crowbar, drags you down to whar you kin git a squar' meal o' brimstone an' sulphur at all hours, cheap fer nothin'. There's me—Old Business in a minnit! Used to be a hard-shell—a reg'lar snappin'-turkle—afore I fell from grace an' tuck to runnin' a monte bank. Your speakin' o' another day comin', 'minded me of the way I used to sling the gospel at the critters who thunk thar wasn't anybody like Brother —. Thar! I reckon I done fergot what I come nyar fer," and Old Business abruptly interrupted himself.

"Then you have been a preacher?" smiled Austin.

"Hain't I jist! Lord love ye, boy, I've been a little o' most everythin' in my time. When I was a little shaver I driv' a canal-boat; but one night I went to the theayter. That settled me. I 'tarmined to be one o' them acter fellers what kicked round and chawed soap. I didn't stick to the biz long. First night I was on I had to take keer o' the cheers an' sich like. The dog-goned boys, they yelled out soup, or sich like stuff. Made me mad, it did so! I wasn't no hash-slinger; not much. I jist lepped the stage an' mounted 'em. Then thar was some ear clawin'; but, somehow, my years got the most. Then I went whalin'. Fust whale we saw an' struck bu'sted up our boat an' sucked me down red-e. Reckon I lived thar nigh two weeks afore I coukl cut way out. Whale r'ared up and kicked me overboard. n ontel I struck shore—a cannibal island. Queen d over heels in love with me, so we hitched, stole

a canoe, and paddled to a white-man's kentry ag'in, w we jined a show as the latest patent out on baby chawers. But whar's the use in talkin'! I've bin everywhar an everythin', if not more. Yet I ain't proud—not a mite."

"I reckon you made the best preacher—you've got the gift o' gab most powerful big," dryly observed Pike.

"I was too pop'lar; that's what made me quit. The sisteren they git so powerful a'fected they'd hang on my neck an' hug an' kiss an' beller over me—kep' my clothes so pesky wet I jist ketched my death o' cold, an' had to sour on 'em—fact! But thar—Business is my name an' business is my natur'. Then le's talk business."

"You said that afore," put in Pike.

"I reckon you fellers hev hearn tell o' a pesky critter called Vincente Barada, an' his gang?"

"The one the rumpus was about at Wild-cat?"

"The very same varmint. He's the subject o' my discourse, that is, he's what I want to talk about jest now. I fust knowed him in '49; liked 'im fust rate, too, ontel one day he rubbed out my brother Jcemes. They'd bin hevin' a quiet game o' draw, an' the last han' was a pesky queer one—each feller held *four aces*. Barada he just stuck Jim under the short ribs, cabbaged the stakes an' puckacheed, hot foot. I tuck his trail, an' I'm on it yit. I blowed the gaff on 'im at Wild-cat, but he dodged me. 'Twar a long time afore I could git track o' him ag'in, but I've good reasons fer thinkin' that he is in these parts—indeed, I'm pretty sartin I kin put my han' right on 'im now. But I want to find out what his little game is, fust, an' spile him in that, then come down on him like a thousan' o' bricks."

"What are your reasons for believing he is in these parts?" asked Austin, with a quick glance at Pike.

"One is this. You know the day you hed the turn-up with the cinnamon? Waal, that same day I overhearn two fellers talkin'—I'll tell ye who they was, some time. One feller he told the other *the capt'in* wanted him to locate in Windy Gap, ready fer business, an' handed him a note from the boss—this same," and Old Business produced the note that Eli Brand had crumbled up and thrown away.

The note had no address; it was a simple order for some one, whose name was not mentioned, to obey the bearer as though he was the writer—Vincente Barada.

"That's *one* o' my reasons," added Old Business. "I've got others, but that'll answer fer jest now. Lis'en an' I'll tell ye what it is I want o' you two. I know more o' you than you think, mebbe. I know that you hev got plenty o' grit an' backbone enough to fight a thousan' at a time, ef you was pushed. I know you're honest an' ready to fight in a good cause. That's way I come to you. This is a good cause. These bands o' mountain thieves an' cut-throats is a disgrace to the kentry. Ef a feller makes a strike in a honest way, he's got to sleep with both eyes open an' a pistol in each hand to defend his airnin's, or else the chainces air that he'll wake up in the mornin' to find his plunder gone up the flume an' his throat cut from year to year—like the mouth o' a Ute at grub-time. Ain't that 'bout the lay-out?"

"It's too true," earnestly replied Austin. "I believe before God that my father met his death in some such way. He wrote to us that he had made a fortune—over fifty thousand dollars—and said that he would be with us almost as soon as his letter. He did not come—we never heard from him afterward. The suspense killed mother. I did what I could for my sister—she is married now, to a good man, thank God!—and came out here to see if I could trace or learn anything concerning his fate—only to fail!"

"I hearn somethin' 'bout that, which is another o' my reasons fer pickin' you out. You'll be keener on the trail. As fer your pard, thar, I don't know so much 'bout him—though he do say as how we've met somewhar afore—"

"I know it—that's flat!" doggedly muttered Pike. "But I can't place ye—wish 't I could. Sometimes I think you're a feller 'at was oncet a good fri'nd o' mine, who did me a great sarvice. Then ag'in it 'pears to me you're the pesky nip that cheated me out o' my eye-teeth in a hoss-trade. Which is which, anyhow?"

"Mebbe I'm all two, both on 'em," chuckled Old Business.

"I reckon we 'member it all, arter a bit, ef you've got patience."

"What is it you want us to do?" asked Austin.

"I said we'd swap help. I'll tell ye fust what my offer is. You must know I've tramped purty well over these diggin's, an' I ain't a man to keep my eyes shet while lookin' fer a trail. T'other day—don't matter jest when or whar, fer they say walls hev ears sometimes—t'other day I made a dis-kivery. I struck a 'pocket' o' gold, to which this yere Dick's Pocket wasn't a primin'. I looked into it a little. I picked up three chunks o' pure gold, each one big's my fist—"

Old Business abruptly paused, and a strange light filled his eyes. A half-stifled exclamation from without came to his ears, and his keen wit realized the impending danger. But his voice never changed as he arose and said:

"I'm drier 'n a fish—wait tell I git a drink."

He picked up the iron bucket of water, took a drink, then dextrously flung its contents over the fire, extinguishing ever spark.

"Lay down an' look to your weepsons, boys! Thar's body outside!" he cried, shrilly.

CHAPTER X.

A CHANGE OF BASE.

THE half-stifled exclamation that brought the startling revelation to such an abrupt termination came from the lips of Eli Brand. Despite his usual coolness and self-control, the statement of Old Business momentarily threw him off his guard. But the cool manner in which the old hunter extinguished the fire and left the interior of the hut in complete darkness, and the sharp click of firearms being prepared for use, recalled Brand to a full sense of his imprudence.

Ten minutes earlier he would have welcomed a discovery after that manner. Reckless, hardened and crime-stained as he undoubtedly was, Eli Brand found it hard to shoot down an unsuspecting man from under cover, and twice his parted lips had closed again without uttering the fatal word.

Then came the story of the wonderfully rich "pocket" or "placer," where the big nuggets of virgin gold might be had for the mere stooping to pick it up. That unlucky exclamation! Only for it, they would have learned the exact position of this marvelous deposit, and then—Well, 'twould be easy to burn powder to win such a stake.

"Quick—follow me!" hissed Eli Brand, crouching down and gliding rapidly away from the brush shanty.

Only one of the party hesitated. That was Frank Mason, the youthful desperado. He was ignorant of Brand's sudden change of programme—he knew that they had been ordered to put this man out of the way. The hasty retreat of his comrades looked to him like arrant cowardice, and he resolved to shame them, if nothing more.

Drawing a revolver, he fired two shots in swift succession into the brush, aiming low at the point where a moment before he had seen the miners sitting. If a bold, it was no less a foolish action, and brought its own speedy punishment.

The sound of the shots told Old Business from what quarter danger threatened, and with one leap he passed out at the half-open door, pistol in hand. He saw the crouching figure, and instantly covered it.

Devil's Frank realized his peril, but was not quick enough to avert it. Just as he sprung forward to close with his enemy, the bullet from the death-dealing revolver pierced his heart, and he fell, a quivering mass of clay, at the feet of Old Business.

From their covert among the rocks and bushes, the four men were witnesses of the tragedy, which would have speedily become a double one, at least, had not Eli Brand interposed to check his comrades.

"Are ye fools?" he angrily hissed. "If you kill him now, who will show us the 'pocket'? Keep cover close; we don't want to rub him out now if it can be helped. Hal he has scented us!"

Whether Old Business had heard the sharp whisper, or had in some other way discovered that other enemies were near, as well as their probable location, no sooner had he fired the shot that wound up Devil's Frank's earthly career, than he leaped back behind the brush shanty.

"They mean mischief—we'd better make tracks while we can," hurriedly added Brand.

"Fer why should we do that?" growled Black Jack. "We got orders from the boss to rub out the varmints. Then he's made cold meat o' Frank—the lad was ekil to the best in our gang—an' now, you want to sneak off an' leave that cuss to chuckle over cleanin' us out."

"He'll pay for it all in good time," impatiently added Brand. "But can't you understand anything? You heard what he said about the 'pocket'—wouldn't it be better to let him run until he has shown us the placer? Hal they're up to something," he added, as a faint noise was heard from the direction of the shanty. "Quick—decide. In a minute more we may have to fight them, whether or no."

"You strike out—we'll foller. Boss told us to 'bey you," uttered Black Jack, though with great reluctance.

"Easy, then. We won't fight unless they force it on us—then of course they must have the best in the shop. Keep close to me and don't make any sound. That devil can shoot as well in the dark as though it was broad day. Easy, now."

Crawling through the undergrowth, and around boulders, Eli Brand led his men away from the spot with a skill and celerity that spoke volumes for his experience as a scout. All was silent in the vicinity of the miners' shanty. Apparently Old Business and his comrades were waiting for their enemies to make their next move.

Reaching a point further up the hill, from whence the shanty could still be dimly made out, Brand paused.

"We'll settle this business right now, pard. First, have you any objections to overhauling the gold mine of that old snoozer?"

"No, we ain't that kind o' critters. Only—it 'pears to me we'll hev to find out whar it is first," said Black Jack.

"Spoken like a prophet! He'll show us where to look."

"Ah, git out—what ye givin' us?"

"Not willingly, of course, yet he must do it, all the same. This night's work'll make him a little shy, but he'll soon forget it. We must watch him until he does—dog his every footstep until he leads us to the pocket—then we can send him up the flume and jump his claim."

"D'y mind that, now?" said Lynch, with a triumphant glance at his comrades. "Ain't he the devil's own b'y fer skamin', jist!"

"He'd swell mischief fust thing. Four o' us couldn't trail 'bout—"

"You're devilish thick-headed to-night, Jack," imp. added Brand. "We'll shadow him by turns, don't you And we'd better begin this very night, then there'll be n chance of their giving us the slip; come, how shall it be? Draw lots for the first turn?"

This proposition was assented to, and fortune decided that Hank Hurley, the gaunt, taciturn member of the party, should be the first to act as spy, to be relieved at noon the next day. Brand gave him a few directions, then left the spy to himself. The better to prevent suspicion, in case there should be any inquiry into the events of the night, it was deemed best for the trio to separate and each reach his quarters by a different route, which was accordingly done.

It was nearly day-dawn when Eli Brand paused at the entrance of the Metropolitan Hotel. As he glanced down the street, he could make out the gaudy transparency overhanging the door of the Horn of Plenty, and knew by that that the game was still in full blast. For a moment he hesitated, as though half-inclined to visit the tables again, but finally turned and entered the hotel.

He found a light in his room and Edna there awaiting his return. As he saw this, a half-smothered curse broke from his lips. He was not in the humor for a conversation such as he saw shadowed in Edna's pale countenance.

"You look tired, father," quietly observed the maiden, placing a chair for Brand.

"I am tired—too tired to talk. What're you doing up so late? You'd ought to 've been in bed and asleep these six hours," growled this model parent.

"I have been waiting for you—"

"The more fool you, then," brutally. "Am I a child that you keep such close watch of my goings and comings? You can find better employment that will suit us both better. If you want anything just tell me so, at a proper time, and you shall have it. But don't let's have any more of this sitting-up business."

"I do want something—I want to leave this horrid place!" cried Edna, impulsively. "You don't know what I have to bear, father. I've tried to tell you more than once, but you never would listen. You *must* listen now!"

"Come, come, girl, I reckon you forget just who you're talking to. I *must* do this and I *mustn't* do that—"

"I didn't mean to make you angry, father—please don't look at me like that," pleaded Edna, and she knelt beside the scowling man, her arms wound around him, her face upturned to his with such a winsome look that the frown gradually died away, the hard light faded from the black eyes, and Eli Brand's voice sounded actually affectionate as he spoke.

"You're a good girl, after all, Edna—much too good for this life we're leading here."

"Then why not leave it—why not go somewhere, far away, where we can lead a quiet, peaceful life? Ah, father, if you only knew how—"

"Bosh! I know this much—that you don't know what you're talking about. We're doing very well here—quite as well as could be expected."

"Do you think so, father?" asked Edna, sadly; "I didn't wish to trouble you, if it could be avoided, but, father, Juan Cabrera was here to-day."

"Here—where?" sharply demanded Brand, starting to his feet, his face first flushing, then becoming ghastly pale.

"He came here—forced himself into my room. You were away. He only laughed at me when I threatened to tell you of his conduct. He laughed and said that your hands were tied—that he could make you kneel at his feet like a pitiful cur, if he wished. Father, say that he lied!"

"What did he want?" hoarsely demanded Brand. "You did not make him angry?"

Edna stared in mute amazement. She saw that her father was trembling in every limb—that his face wore a look of terror, while his eyes were like those of a hunted animal. Good heavens! could it all be true?

Brand went to the table and took a long draught from the black bottle. With a violent effort he succeeded in partially calming his nerves, sufficient, at least, to speak steadily.

"Did you hear me? what did he want?"

"He—it was what I told you before, father," faltered Edna. "He wanted me to marry him."

"And you—what answer did you give?"

"Father! what answer *could* I give? I told him *no*—that I loathed and detested him! He only laughed, and said that he must have a little talk with you. He tried to kiss me before he left, but I struck him, and threatened him with my revolver. Then he—he left."

At this point Edna completely broke down, covering her face with her hands and sobbing bitterly. Brand paced the floor uneasily. But at length he said:

"Don't cry, child. I'll speak to this gentleman, and tell him that he mustn't trouble you. There is something between us—a delicate matter, which you could not understand."

"He insults me, and yet you say that you will *talk* to him—nothing more?" cried Edna, her eyes flashing. "You will not protect me. Then there is only one course left for me. I will appeal to the landlord—to any gentleman."

"Are you mad, girl?" cried Brand. "Would you ruin me?"

"Would it ruin you? Father, I always try to obey consult your wishes; but submit to that man's in *not*! If you cannot, or will not protect me, th to those who will."

"If I tell you my reasons will you keep t'

"Father I have I ever given you cause for doubting me?"
 "No—then listen. This man, by speaking one word
hang me as a murderer!" gasped Brand, hoarsely.

CHAPTER XI.

BENEATH THE REDWOOD.

THE sun had already passed its meridian and was dipping slowly toward the western range, when Mark Austin left the rude brush shanty. Despite the stirring narrative of Old Business and the startling events so closely following—the pistol shots that only a prompt obedience of Old Business' command had rendered futile; the avenging shot that had cut short the youthful desperado's career; the painful suspense of those long hours, waiting and watching, pistol in hand, for an attack, hearing a bloodthirsty enemy in every sough of the morning breeze, in every rustle of the bushes, seeing a foe in every shadow that crossed their front; despite all this, Mark looked fresh and more like his usual self than he had at any time since his struggle with the cinnamon bear.

When daylight came to their aid, Old Business quickly satisfied himself that the enemy had fled, abandoning their dead. But he was only partly right. High up the hill was stationed Hank Hurley. Selecting a large, table-topped rock, covered with a dense growth of wild oats and vines, he had crawled into the cave and lay at full length, peering down upon the shanty.

He saw the old hunter bend over the corpse of Devil's Frank for a few moments. Then he passed slowly over the ground as though reading the signs left by that night's work. He saw him measure the different footprints, and apparently note down the result of his researches upon a scrap of paper. And seeing all this, Hank Hurley began to grow uneasy. Did the old man mean to "blow" that night's work, and he was preparing his evidence? It looked very much like it.

Then Old Business and Long Pike dug a shallow grave and buried the body of the young desperado. Then all was still around the shanty, and hours elapsed before either of the three friends emerged.

It was mid afternoon when Mark Austin walked slowly up the valley that led toward Windy Gap, from Dick's Pocket. His mind was busy enough—too busy for comfort. Not only had he his one great trouble, that which brought him to these wilds—the yet unsolved mystery of his father's disappearance—but the past week had been crowded with startling events.

His peculiar introduction to Edna Brand—the first woman who had ever touched his heart of hearts. Not that he believed himself in love, as yet, but the scales might drop from his eyes at any moment. Ever since his wounds would allow him to leave the shanty, he had wandered through the hills in the vague hope of again meeting Edna; though the deserted brush camp in the valley of the waterfall prepared him for disappointment.

Then the woman—the glorious creature whom he had met at the Horn of Plenty. How easily he could recall her every feature, her smile, her glowing, almost passionate glances, her musical voice when addressing him—all, every detail. And in the thought his face flushed, his pulse beat quickly, his every nerve was quivering with—he scarce knew what.

Under this influence, Mark, instead of following the winding valley, breasted the steep ascent, nor paused until he reached the summit. Baring his heated brow to the cool, refreshing breeze, he gazed around him with that peculiar sense of perfect freedom which one can only feel when far beyond the crowded haunts of civilization.

But this feeling was abruptly dispelled. His face suddenly flushed, his eyes filled with an eager light, his breath came quick and short. Near a quarter of a mile beyond him, though upon the same ridge, grew a bushy, wide-spreading redwood tree. At its base a human being was seated—he could distinguish the flowing drapery of a woman.

"If it's only her!" muttered Mark, as he strode rapidly forward.

Whether he was thinking of Edna Brand or Pacific Pete's sister could only be surmised. But the glad smile that lighted up his handsome face as the woman quickly raised her head on hearing his footsteps, revealing the features of Edna Brand, told that the young miner was not greatly disappointed.

"At last, Miss Brand! Surely my good angel guided me!" cried Mark, eagerly, extending both hands.

Edna seemed overpowered by this enthusiastic greeting, and though she arose, placing her hand in his, her eyes were downcast. Mark could not but notice the red and swollen lids that but too plainly told she had been weeping long and bitterly. He stopped so abruptly in his greeting that Edna glanced up involuntarily. She read his thoughts, and flushed deeply, murmuring something about a wretched headache. Mark, of course, expressed his sympathy, and then, by gentle degrees, they passed into an animated and pleasant conversation.

"I am really glad to meet you—I have thought often of you since that day; you remember?"

"Do I not?" replied Edna, softly. "Only for you—what would have become of me? It makes me shudder every time I think of that frightful bear—"

"And if it hadn't been for me, you wouldn't have taken that trail, and so the danger would never have been; so we're quits on that score," laughed Austin; "but please resume

your seat. It is so pleasant here—I must remember this spot, and mean to spend all my Sabbaths here."

After a little hesitation, Edna sat down, and Mark assumed an easy position at her feet.

"You must have thought strange—that I was very ungrateful in going away so suddenly that day, without—" faltered Edna, flushing painfully.

"I assure you that I had no such thoughts, then or now," eagerly replied Austin. "I was in the hands of a good friend, and you could have done nothing. But—may I speak plainly—you will not be offended?"

"Not unless you give me good cause—and I don't believe you will. Besides, how can I help myself?" and Edna laughed a little mischievously, for she could not leave her position between the high roots of the redwood without stepping directly over the young miner.

"Good! you are my captive now—I mean to be a cruel jailer, and keep you here to the last moment. But, as I was saying: can you guess where I went first after I was able to leave the shanty?"

Of course she could not guess. Did the woman ever live who could, or would, solve such a conundrum, under similar circumstances?

"I went to your camp—the round trip took me all day—but you were gone. Do you know, when I entered the deserted house, it seemed to me as though I had lost the only friend I had in the world. You won't think me foolish? Remember I was weak—no, I won't try to hide behind such a flimsy excuse; I really believe it would have been the same if I had been perfectly well. I sat down there and thought—how much and what I thought, you will never guess. And then—now you will laugh! I searched the cabin from top to bottom, looked into every chink and cranny, even up the chimney! What for? I scarcely knew. But I do know what would have made me perfectly happy—a line, just a word of farewell, anything to show that you had not entirely forgotten the stranger of that day."

"I didn't think—" stammered Edna, her eyes sinking before his earnest gaze.

"No, how should you? No sane person could have thought of a man's being so silly. I laughed at myself when I left, or tried to, but it didn't sound very hearty."

"We left the next day, for Windy Gap. I did think of you—you have been so candid, that it gives me courage to speak openly. I thought of you often, for I feared you had not escaped that dreadful bear easily. But what could I do? You were a stranger; I could not go around making inquiries; and father was so busy."

"Then you did think of me?" eagerly. "That is enough—more than enough! I'll fight a thousand bears!"

"All at once?" quickly interrupted Edna.

Not very polite, reader, I grant it. But please suspend judgment for a moment. Edna Brand is not intended as a "model young lady," nor yet as a pattern for you to follow. Her "raising" will not permit. Brought up by a vagabond, dissolute—not to speak plainer—father, ignorant of a mother's watchful care, her life a wandering one, where a virtuous or honorable acquaintance was the rare exception, how can you expect a dignified, frigidly-polite, "perfect lady?" Indeed, I think she deserves credit for being truly modest, if outspoken, if a little independent in her views and actions. Despite all this, she was a virtuous, pure-hearted, generous woman—though only a girl in years.

There—I feel better now!

Mark was acute enough to read her interruption aright. He saw that he must "make haste slowly," or else he might alarm the mountain bird too soon.

You would not thank me were I to transcribe their conversation. Interesting it was, beyond all doubt, to them, and time flew by almost unnoticed. Interesting too, it appeared to be, to a third individual. For nearly half an hour he stood leaning against a rock, beyond earshot, yet where he could watch the varying expression of their faces. That lithe form, the white face, handsome as an archangel, the glowing black eyes, all combined, could only belong to Pacific Pete.

At length Edna glanced around and observed the motionless figure. A frown rose to Mark's brow, as he also noticed the man, but before he could speak, Pacific Pete glided forward, and doffing his hat with a low bow, spoke:

"I beg pardon for intruding, but am I right in thinking that I address Miss Brand?"

"That is my name—yes," replied Edna, as she arose.

Mark followed her example, but the bright smile had left his face, and his eyes glittered angrily. He felt like cursing this man for cutting short this delightful interview.

"Ah, I did not think I could be mistaken," easily continued Pacific Pete, again inclining his head and body with the grace of a dancing-master. "Though I have never had the pleasure of meeting you before, yet I have heard much of our new neighbor. So much beauty—"

"Excuse me, sir," sharply interrupted Mark, by no means pleased with the intruder's easy fluency. "If you have business with this lady, be so kind as to state it in as few words as possible."

"Indeed I am I to understand, then—"

"That she is under my protection at present—yes."

"You are a stranger to me, though I know this lady's father well. May I ask your name?" coolly added Pacific Pete.

"That is easily answered. My name is Mark Austin. If you wish to learn anything further, I can easily be found."

"Good enough! You can call me Pacific Pete, for want of

a better cognomen. And now, Miss Brand, your father asked me if I would bring you to him. He has pressing news for you. Allow me?" and he politely offered his arm.

"Your pardon, sir," said Mark, promptly interfering. "We had not quite finished our conversation. If it is just the same to you, I will see Miss Brand safe to the hotel."

Edna accepted the proffered arm, and they passed on, leaving Pacific Pete standing like a statue. Only for a moment. Then the terrible fire blazed up in his eyes, his face turned a sickly white, and he half drew a revolver from his bosom. But as if thinking better of it, he turned and strode rapidly away.

CHAPTER XII.

A LITTLE GAME OF "DRAW."

ABOUT noon, on that same day, Old Business declared his intention of paying Windy Gap a visit. Both Pike and Mark sought to dissuade him, declaring that it would be worse than folly to obtrude himself upon the notice of their enemies. We have seen how consistent Mark was; but then he had an unusually fair excuse for contradicting himself.

"You fellers don't look at the thing in a judgmatical light," quoth Old Business, quietly. "Who knows anythin' about our doin's last night? Nobody 'cept the ones we licked in the fust place—an' you kin bet they won't squeel on tharselves—an' the pardners o' the boy I wiped out. They *might* git me lynched, fer revenge, but in doin' it they'd lose all chaine o' sharin' in my 'pocket'—so you see 'tain't no great resk I run, a'ter all."

Whether he really placed faith in this rather dubious safeguard or not, Old Business entered Windy Gap with the careless ease of one who has nothing to fear. If he noticed the gaunt figure of Hank Hurley shadowing him, he made no sign.

What his object was in entering the town, can only be surmised. He stopped at the Metropolitan Hotel and took a drink at the bar, leisurely surveying the half a dozen customers who were lazily lounging around the rusty, cold stove, discussing the opening night at the Golden Horn. Neither the subject nor the talkers appeared to have any interest for the old hunter, and paying for his drink, he strolled down the crooked street.

After a rapid but close scrutiny of Pacific Pete's building—now closed, even to the heavy wooden shutters—Old Business entered the Hole in the Wall. Apparently the Sabbath day never crossed that threshold. Though undoubtedly it was a day of rejoicing for "Orleans Jess"—the dark, quad-room-looking keeper—it certainly was not one of rest. Not only the sports of Windy Gap, but many miners from claims for miles around, congregated here every Sabbath day, to enjoy a "drunk," and to double or lose their week's earnings across the poker-table.

"The sweet-scentedest crowd I've struck since I 'tended church in St. Louey!" approvingly remarked Old Business, taking a leisurely survey of the assembly. "Gentlemen, this is me—Old Business in a minnit, you bet! The purp who's jest struck it richer 'n any other whelp in ten counties! Step ap an' nominate your pizon. I b'long to the church, but I'm goin' to git drunker 'n a b'iled owl this deal, you kin jest go your pile on that!"

Many a more polished address has been delivered, but certainly none more successful than this. As one man the crowd advanced, the majority caring only for getting a free drink, but a few interchanged rapid but intelligible glances, as the ragged hunter drew forth a heavy pouch of golden nuggets and "beans," bidding Orleans Jess help himself.

"You're new to these parts, I reckon, stranger?" observed Vinegar Sol, a tall, sharp-faced man in a rakish hat and flashy suit of plaid.

"Not edactly. I was here when Dick's Pocket was fust struck. I lost sight of a pard, an' tuck in this run, thinkin' mebbe he'd follered the big rush. His name in the States was Dick Austin—a tall, fine-lookin' critter—you'd take 'im fer a gospel-slinger at fust sight, he was so 'ligious."

"There has been no reward offered for information concerning his whereabouts, I dare say," half inquired a little red-faced man—the same whom the reader may have remarked on the occasion rendered memorable by the "little argument" between Pacific Pete and Big Tom Noxon.

"Not that I knows on, but—" and Old Business produced from the depths of his rags a nugget of almost virgin gold, nearly the size of a hen's egg. "You see this? Waal, I'll give that to the critter who kin tell me anythin' sartin 'bout my man."

"I claim the reward, then," eagerly cried the "bummer," his eyes sparkling. "You spoke of Dick's Pocket a moment since. Well, your friend was the discoverer—"

"You don't mean—"

"But I *do*. Gospel Dick we all called him, because he was never seen without a Bible—and he delivered some excellent sermons, too. Then he was robbed and lost his mind—became a lunatic, in fact, and roamed far and wide, searching for the man who had murdered him (that's just the way he expressed it) and stolen his gold. You know how he discovered the 'big pocket'—but he was dead when found. 'ry likely he never knew that he was dying upon a bed of lost solid gold."

But the proof—how kin I tell that this is *my* pard?"

knew him before his injury—I saw him before he was

buried, and was allowed to keep this key-check as a memorial of my departed friend," replied the bummer, handing Old Business a small silver check, bearing the name, "J. R. Austin," then adding: "My name is Horace Walpole Dobbs. You can ask any of these gentlemen as to my veracity. They all know me."

"You kin trust him in anythin', stranger, 'cept whar whisky is consarned," testified Orleans Jess.

Old Business passed the nugget over to Horace Walpole Dobbs, without a word. There was a grave shade upon his usually rollicking face that evidenced how keenly the information had touched him. The miners and "sports" noticed this fact, and with a consideration scarcely to be expected, returned to their respective tables and resumed their play.

But the old hunter was not one to long remain bowed down, and his face soon resumed its wonted look of reckless good-nature, as he strolled around the poker-tables, now commenting upon a hand—of course after the deal was over—and interspersing his remarks with queer expressions that caused all anger at his criticisms to vanish before a hearty laugh, now watching the game in silence.

"You 'pear to be pritty well posted on the pasteboards, old man," at length remarked Vinegar Sol, who, by-the-by, had been playing a miserable hand ever since Old Business came in. "Ef you're good on the draw as you air on the talk, I reckon you'd be a tough cuss at poker. Yit I don't mind tryin' ye a turn or two, jest to pass the time."

"Young man, look whar ye gwine," responded Old Business, with a ludicrous nasal twang. "The trail afore ye is crookeder 'n the horns o' a ten-year-old ram, an' kivered all 'long with sand burrs, nettles, prickly p'ars, an' pizon tarantulers o' 'tarnal death, a-waitin' to ketch you by the heel an' tote you down to the kitchen whar fire an' brimstone is plentier nor crawlin' critters on a Ute buck. 'Pent, sinner, 'pent—'pent afore the devil 'calls' ye, fer then it'll be too late. You never ketch him holdin' less 'n four aces, wi' hafe a dozen more safe in the crook o' his tail, ready in case you ring in a 'Arkansaw deck' on 'im. Whar's the use in buckin' ag'inst a critter as is al'ays shore to overdraw ye? Ye boun' to lose—an' what then? Oh! you pore mizzable sinner—you blind, two-legged shote o' moral raggedness which don't got no more sense than to keep a-rootin' 'long the trail which leads down to never come back ag'in—look on this picter, an' then ax me ag'in to jine you. You boun' to lose—what then? What does the good book say? Don't it say the devil 'll jump your claim? Jest think how ye'll feel down thar—you settin' on a sharp-p'inted stone which is white hot, a-eatin' b'ilin' brimstone with a red-hot scoop-shovel, while the boss devil stan's over ye, 'casionaly stirrin' ye up wi' his forty tined pitchfork! How's *that* fer high, anyhow?"

"Ef you wasn't so powerful ugly, durned if I wouldn't bet big money on your being a woman, your tongue runs so pesky nimble," retorted Vinegar Sol. "But what say? You ain't afeard to take a little turn at 'draw'?"

"Me afeard? You don't know me, boss—not much! Thar's only one 'bjection. I'm little old lightnin' on the draw—I'm sure to bu'st every critter I play with. Can't help it—the keerds *will* run that-a-way, anyhow. It's good enough for me, but, somehow, t'other fellers don't like it so well. That makes hard feelin's, ye see—"

"What a teller wins in these parts I reckon he's fairly 'titled to," grinned Vinegar Sol. "Ef we win, good enough but ef we lose we ain't the boys to squeal—not much!"

"You're the kind I like to meet, pard—but you'll play kinder light at fust, won't ye? Don't run the old man *too* hard?" quietly said Old Business, taking a seat at the table on the side opposite the door.

A four-handed party was quickly made up, and the bystanders interchanged smiles of keen amusement as the game opened. Vinegar Sol, Keno Dan and Billy Breeze had, for years, divided the honors of being the "boss poker players" in the Valley Mines. Yet, as the game progressed the match seemed more even. Either Old Business possessed a power of manipulating the cards little short of marvelous, or else, as he said, he was a prime favorite of fortune. Though in reality it was a match of three players against one, the pile of gold lying before the old man seemed never to shrink beneath its first dimensions, while it was often more than double its first value. The bystanders were enthusiastic. Never before had they witnessed such a perfect exposition of the beauties of "draw." But the game was to end without either party gaining a decisive victory.

A quick, firm tread at the door drew all eyes in that direction, and the crowd silently made way before the bar. The new-comer was Pacific Pete, and his white, hard-set face, his glittering eyes and compressed lips, betokened a dangerous mood. He took a quick survey of the crowd, then, in a sharp voice, ordered, rather than requested them to join him.

Pacific Pete was not a man to be lightly refused at any time, much less now, when he was already "boiling over," as the expression runs. He had just come down from the hills, where Mark Austin had so coolly bluffed him.

At the entrance Old Business looked up, then pulled the shabby hat further over his eyes, and when his comrades arose in haste he was still quietly running over his cards.

"You heard me invite all hands?" sharply added Pacific Pete.

"I pass, pard," quietly replied Old Business, never raising his head. "I b'long to the church—can't drink on Sunday."

"And yet you play poker—what 're you giving us, old man? Come, be sociable; you'd better join us."

There was a sharp, metallic ring in his voice. That made

crowd instinctively draw aside, leaving a clear space between the two.

"Thank ye, kindly, fri'nd, but I ain't on it to-night."

"I think you'd better join us!" and a double click accompanied the words, as Pacific Pete drew a revolver.

Old Business raised his head sharply and pushed back his slouched hat. The light shone full upon his countenance, and the gamblers started as they observed the change. It was as though a mask had suddenly been torn from his face.

With a sharp cry Pacific Pete shrunk back as though he had been dealt a mortal wound. One quick leap and he left the room.

"The critter looked sick—reckon the cramps tuck 'im," quoth Old Business, calmly, as he sat shuffling the cards.

CHAPTER XIII.

"WILL YOU WALK INTO MY PARLOR?"

MARK AUSTIN's reception by Eli Brand was anything but cordial—was, in truth, almost insulting, as he ordered Edna to her room. At any other time Mark probably would have retorted in a manner more striking than agreeable; but now, though his finger itched and his cheek flushed, he bowed politely and passed into the bar-room. In some cases the best safeguard a man has is a pretty daughter.

Mark appropriated one of the heavy, straight-backed wooden chairs, and, leaning against the dingy, smoke-stained wall, lighted his pipe. Thirsty mortals passed in and out, but their coarse talk and loud voices did not disturb the young miner. A faint smile played around his lips, and a soft light filled his eyes.

That he was thinking of Edna Brand may be accepted as a fact. It was wonderful how accurately he could recall every word of their conversation together. But the words that he remembered most distinctly were these, spoken just before they entered Windy Gap:

"I will be at the deadwood tree next Sunday, or, if anything prevents, I will send you a note in time."

The dingy lamps had been burning for over an hour, night had descended upon Windy Gap when Mark Austin was aroused from his reverie by the sound of his name.

Glancing quickly up he saw a gigantic figure leaning across the bar in conversation with the keeper. As the latter nodded across the room the giant turned quickly, and Mark Austin recognized the huge negro who had acted as doorkeeper at the Horn of Plenty.

"Your name Massa Mark Austin, sah?" asked the negro, as he stepped forward, respectfully uncovering his round, bullet head.

"That's my name—yes. What's wanted?"

"Dis yer letter meant for you, sah. You was to please read it 'mejiately, missee say."

With these words, which sent the hot blood leaping into the young miner's face, the negro produced a tiny note, carefully enveloped in a bit of white silk.

Mark gazed curiously upon the inscription, written in a delicate running hand, the paper exhaling a subtle, delicious perfume. The name was his, and satisfied at length that there was no mistake, Mark broke the seal.

"MARK AUSTIN, ESQ.:"

"Dear Sir:—Please suspend judgment until you hear my reasons for thus addressing you—almost an entire stranger. Believe me, they will prove a sufficient excuse."

"Will you kindly grant me a brief interview? I cannot rest until I set myself right in your estimation. You promised me my revenge last night. Instead, grant me this favor—believe me, 'twill not soon be forgotten."

"The bearer—trustworthy in every respect—will conduct you to me."

"In true friendship,

ISABELLA."

Mark read the note twice over before he could bring himself to believe there was no mistake. Then he turned to the negro and asked:

"You are sure this note was intended for me?"

"Yes, sah. Missee p'inted you out when you kem up de street wid lady. She say she got 'tickler business wid dat gemman—meanin' you, massa."

"It sounds honest enough," muttered Mark, half aside, "and I have more than one enemy, it seems. It may be a snare—look here, friend, I'll go with you, but no tricks on travelers, mind."

"You t'ink it a trick, massa, me go tell Missee Bella you t'ink she settin' trap fo' you," quietly replied the black.

"Easy, boy—don't be quite so impatient. Your mistress is the lady I saw at the Horn of Plenty, last night."

The black nodded assent. Though scarcely less puzzled than before, Mark quickly decided to follow the adventure up and see what was beneath it. At his motion, the black led the way along the street, and respectfully held the door of the Golden Horn open for Mark. Passing through the vestibule, across the now deserted and gloomy gambling room, and touching a secret spring in the wall, the black spoke for the first time since leaving the hotel.

Massa, please go up dem sta'rs, turn de knob o' de do' on de left, den enter. Missee Bella say she wait dar."

In obedience to the spring, a narrow door glided open, until then ingeniously concealed, a narrow flight of carpeted stairs were revealed, and after a momentary hesitation, Mark slowly ascended them, despite the cold chill that crept over his frame

as the secret door closed behind him with a muffled click. Yet, knowing that retreat was cut off, Mark kept a hand upon his ready revolver, half expecting to behold some blood-thirsty enemy burst through the wall at every step. If no treachery was intended, why so much mystery?

The dim light of the hanging lamp revealed the door knob, and turning this, Mark quickly but noiselessly pushed the door wide open—then stood like one petrified.

Was he dreaming—had he fallen asleep only to awake in some enchanted land? Surely this could not be real—in rude, uncouth Windy Gap!

A subdued light filled the room. The warm air was delicately perfumed—the very light and atmosphere of love. The room was richly upholstered; the floor covered with a velvet pile; the walls concealed by curtains of rose-colored silk; rich paintings were upon the wall; at the further end of the apartment stood a richly curtained bed; all this Mark took in at a glance. But his eye rested longer upon the one occupant of the apartment.

Upon a *tete-a-tete* half reclined the lady-dealer of the night before, dressed in crimson and lace, as then, only to the young miner's eyes, looking even more lovely now in the subdued light.

At that moment she glanced up and noticed him standing upon the threshold. Her face flushed deeply, as she half-arose and beckoned him to advance. Feeling a little abashed in his coarse clothes, Mark nevertheless obeyed and returned her greeting without visible awkwardness.

"You were greatly surprised at receiving my note, were you not?" softly uttered the lady, resuming her position and motioning for Mark to follow her example.

"Indeed I was, lady—but at the same time could not help feeling pleasure at the thought of your not having forgotten me."

"Very neatly spoken—and yet you have kept me waiting fully an hour," she laughed, softly. "But there—I did not send for you merely to exchange compliments. Mr. Austin, I believe you are a gentleman. This may be our last—though I sincerely trust not—our last meeting, as it is our first, save that of last night. And now—since I have spoken of that—will you tell me frankly what you thought of my position then?"

"That it was beneath you—that such a life must be horrible to one such as you—a lady," slowly replied Mark.

"You wish to spare me—and I thank you. Last night I read your thoughts far plainer than I can now. Better for me, perhaps, had I never attempted to fathom them—had I only regarded you as one of the common herd—a gambler, with no higher thought than how to place a lucky stake. But we are all blind, sometimes; last night was my turn. From trying to read your thoughts, I—bosh! I feel as though I were dreaming! I can scarcely see your face now. You are not a conjurer?"

Mark muttered a dissent, not very intelligible. He could fully appreciate the force of her remark. He too felt as though in a dream. The room, perfumed air, the weird light, the beautiful woman beside him, so close that her garments touched his; her wondrous eyes, now lustrous, swimming in a languid yet burning light, her perfumed breath mingling with his, the soft, white hand, so warm and velvety, now resting lightly upon his wrist—all these combined might well have unsteadied a stronger head than his.

"You must be a mesmerist—else why have you this strange power over me? No one else has the power to affect me so strongly—what is it? Tell me!"

Mark shook his head helplessly. It was all an enigma to him. Had he been a bystander, merely, he would have laughed and said, "Love-struck, both of 'em—got it bad, too!"

"Listen," and the woman spoke rapidly, in a low tone, but full of expression and pathos. "I felt this power last night—when I first saw you, and that made me have you seated directly in front of me. I felt it growing stronger and stronger with every glance of your eyes, until it was only with a strong exertion of will that I could attend to my duties. I only saw you, of all the players—I dealt for you alone. You had never played faro before—the manner in which you bet plainly evidenced that. I dealt for you alone. The others might lose or win, I cared little; but I played for you to win. When a professional gambler does that, is it not a strong proof of interest? Bah! what matters that, now?"

"I did not send for you to tell you this—but to in part explain why you found me in such a position. You may not care to know—you may go away from here and laugh heartily over my folly—may even jest with your friends—"

"You wrong me, lady," warmly interrupted Mark. "What you confide to me, shall never pass my lips."

"I believe it—from the bottom of my heart I believe it. I could not be so deceived in one. You would be a loyal friend—true to the core—I know that. Ah! had we only met in better days—then I might possibly have found such a friend! But now, what am I? An outcast—one whom all men may sneer at—even insult, as that cur did last night!"

"A lady through all—that you are, and that I will maintain," earnestly cried Mark, his hands closing over hers.

"You are laughing at me—and yet, I would give half my remaining years to believe that you are sincere—that you will be my friend; one in whom I can confide, on whose truth and fidelity I could rely! I have dreamt of such a friend; will you be such a one?"

"God helping me, I will!" solemnly replied Mark.

Isabella bowed her head over his hands, and touched her

red lips to them. There was a glowing light in her eyes—a light that was almost fierce in its intensity.

The warm pressure nearly unnerved Mark, and he drew his hands away almost rudely. Isabella looked into his eyes half reproachfully.

"You are offended at my gratitude?"

"No; not that; but for *you* to kiss *my* hands—I"

"I know I have no right; you are a gentleman, while I—I am nothing but the gambler's sister—"

"You are cruel, lady—really cruel. You surely never thought that of me," muttered Mark, his voice anything but steady.

"I may be too sensitive—I believe I did wrong you. But in some things I am a perfect child. Let me hold your hands; it will give me courage to tell you my story. If we are never to meet again—which the saints forbid—I would like you to know me as I really am, not as my position now would seem to prove. Thanks; now I feel better."

And so did Mark; he would have been more or less than man, else. A lovely woman close beside him, her soft, warm hands clasped around his, her lustrous eyes looking into his, a world of love in their depths, her perfumed breath barely touching his cheek. Yes, Mark was in no little danger.

CHAPTER XIV.

CLOSE QUARTERS.

"Yes, Mark was in a situation of no little danger, and yet he enjoyed it. Few men wouldn't. There are some perils which even a confirmed coward would like to hug closely to his breast—for instance, Madame Isabella.

"Do you know, I was really afraid of you at first," softly breathed Isabella, gently patting Mark's hands as she gazed confidingly into his face. "You looked so strict, so excessively proper. I like you better now; your brow is smooth, your eyes are gentle, there is a smile upon your lips. I am not afraid of you, while you wear such a look."

"You shall never have cause for fearing me, lady—"

"Call me Isabella; we are to be friends, the best of friends then why so much formality?"

"On condition that you call me Mark, Isabella."

"A bargain—Mark!" gleefully cried Isabella, drawing still nearer the young miner and nestling herself down into a most comfortable position. "And now, you will listen to my story? It is not long, though a painful one."

"If painful, why recall its memory now? Surely you cannot believe that it is needed? I believe that you are a pure, true-hearted woman, nor would I believe myself mistaken were the whole world to declare otherwise."

"I thank you! from my heart I thank you, Mark," faltered Isabella, her swimming eyes looking up into his, her head almost touching his breast as it rested lightly against his arm. But I have nerved myself to tell you all, and I must not falter. You have met my brother—they call him Pacific Pete?"

"Yes, I saw him to-day, on the ridge," and as he spoke, Mark flushed hotly, drawing himself more erect.

The words in a manner recalled his senses. As the face of Edna Brand, so frank and open, so lovely in its womanly purity, rose before him, the comparison was scarcely favorable to Isabella, so different in every respect, save that both were beautiful. The one would nerve a man to dare and endure all for the right; the other—Mark checked his thoughts, with a feeling of self-reproach at having even momentarily doubted her, as Isabella looked full into his eyes.

"I know you were there with Miss Brand. I saw you as you escorted her to the hotel. But I was speaking of my brother. He came in last night, just as you left the hall. It was from him that I learned your name. He has been a kind, true-hearted brother to me, and I trust you two will become good friends. And yet, it is on his account that I am what you see—the outcast, the degraded—"

"My sister—and not even you must slander her," said Mark, gently placing his palm above her ruby lips.

"'Tis nothing but the truth, though I thank you all the same," replied Isabella, with a grateful look. "But let me tell you my story."

"We are Southerners, brother and I, natives of Louisiana. Our family were an old and aristocratic one—the Keyes of Cypress Hill, at one time the richest and most influential in the State. But in grandfather's time, we began to go down the hill. Those were days of heavy gaming, when entire plantations, with all the stock, bipeds and quadrupeds, were sometimes placed upon the turn of a card. Unfortunately my father followed faithfully in his parents' footsteps. Sometimes fortune favored him, and then his profuse hospitality and lavish generosity would have shamed a prince. There could only be one ending. It came; we were beggars. When father realized what he had done, his mind must have given way, for he shot himself—fell dead across the table where he had lost his all.

"Misfortunes came fast upon us. Brother Edward—there were but us two—was at New Orleans when he heard the news, and returned at once to our home—to what *was* our home, I mean. Though a good, dear brother, he has a terrible temper. A word, at times, will set him on fire, and then it would be as easy to check a prairie fire as the torrent of his rage.

"I had never met him in one of these fits, until that day. He believed that father had been foully dealt with—that he had been swindled, if not murdered afterward to conceal the crime. He would hear no reason; he rushed away from the house, and when he returned, there was blood upon his hands! He had sought out the man who had won our all, and after a brief quarrel, had shot him dead.

"Only for me, I believe brother would have remained and dared all—have surrendered the house only with his life. But I pleaded with him, told him that he was my only protector now, that without him I must die of want or come to worse. He yielded, none too soon. A faithful servant warned us of our danger—that a strong force of neighbors were approaching, uttering fierce threats against the *murderer!*

"We mounted our horses and fled, riding without drawing rein until near daylight. That day we remained hidden in the woods. But this part of our story can be summed up in a few words. We escaped pursuit, made our way into Texas, and finally settled down in Nacogdoches.

"It was here that brother first gave signs of having inherited the fatal passion of his forefathers; he was a gambler to the core. Yet, unlike them, he seemed a favorite of fortune. He rarely lost, almost invariably won, and sometimes in large amounts. True to his class—for you will find no more generous men than the true professional gambler—he scattered his gold on every hand, now 'staking' a comrade, now setting a friend in business, furnishing the capital for running a faro-bank. At times we were literally rolling in gold, then again we suffered the acute pangs of poverty, sometimes even lacking the meanest food.

"It was after an unusually hard run of luck, when I was growing thin and actually faint for lack of food, that brother rendered desperate by his continued reverses, too proud to beg a loan from his friends—it was in this trouble that he first disgraced himself. His antagonist detected him cheating; to no one but you, dear friend, could I acknowledge this, but I know that you will understand his feelings. He could not see me starve; for himself he cared nothing.

"He was accused of cheating. Maddened by the shame of the discovery, brother added murder to his crime. In the confusion he escaped unharmed. He told me what had occurred, and poured into my lap the blood-stained gold. He said that we must flee, that the friends of the dead man would hunt him down without mercy. He tried to persuade me to, but I resolved not to desert him. Within half an hour we were riding rapidly away from the town, on two mustangs paid for with the blood-money.

"But why tell you of our life, step by step? From what I have already said, you can imagine the rest. It was one series of success and reverses. We remained stationary longest in the city of Mexico. Brother had a large gambling hall there. The bank was finally broken, just as the first rumors of the gold discovery in California flashed like lightning over the land. We came here; it was the same story, for a time. But then fortune changed. Gold poured in upon us in a constant stream. At this day, I believe brother and I are the two richest persons in America. And yet, can it bring back our lost respectability? No, we are outcasts; outcasts we must remain. We have no friends, no people—my God! do you wonder that at times I fear I am going mad?"

Overcome by strong emotion, Isabella allowed her head to sink against Mark's breast, her face upturned to his, though her eyes were closed, a pearly tear trembling upon the long, silken lashes. Mark's left arm gently closed around her supple form as though involuntarily, and, deeply affected by her sad story, he bowed his head as though to brush away the tears with his lips.

Isabella opened her eyes, lustrous and glowing, despite the moisture. Her bosom heaved convulsively, and she drew his right hand to her breast, pressing it tightly there, as though to still the wild throbbings of her heart. Her red, ripe lips parted—the picture might have tempted Saint Anthony himself.

Mark made no pretense of being a saint. He was a man; the young blood ran hotly in his veins, and he acted as any other man would, under similar circumstances.

His lips met hers in a long, passionate kiss, a kiss such as sets the brain in a whirl, that tingles through every nerve and fiber; a kiss such as has led to the utter destruction of many a noble spirit.

Thus, lip to lip, eye to eye—then Mark drew back, half terrified by the wild, dazzling fire that filled those wondrous orbs. Despite himself, he recalled a story read not many years before—that weird, fantastic creation of Balzac: "THE SUCCUBUS." The eyes whose subtle fire consumed so many hearts, must have been akin to the orbs now looking into his. The surroundings, too, of almost oriental magnificence, the perfumed air—all combined to heighten the resemblance, and Mark drew back with a tremor of almost superstitious awe.

Isabella could not help noticing this abrupt change, and her flushed cheek paled, as she murmured:

"You are angry with me; how have I offended you?"

"I am not offended, only—'tis growing late, and I have a long walk before me," muttered Mark, who, now that his momentary infatuation was over, began to wonder how he could end the interview.

"Must we part thus? Ah! I was supremely happy for a moment; if it could only last! Mark; my master, my king!" and her arms wound eagerly around him, while her face neared his, her warm breath playing upon his cheek. "You must leave me; I cannot live without you; I will not! Nay, hear

me. Is it such a terrible thing, that you need grow so pale? Listen! From the moment when I first set eyes upon you, I loved you—loved you with a fire and intensity of which you cold Northerners can have no conception. And, now, now that your lips have touched mine, your arm clasped me to your breast, I would die were you to leave me. I am not exacting—true love never is. I don't ask so much. Only your love; love me, that is all I ask. Surely, 'twill not beso hard!" and she drew her superb figure erect.

Mark sat there in silence, confounded—as Old Business would have expressed it—like a bump on a log. He knew not what answer to make. The scales had, in a measure, fallen from his eyes. It was passion; not love, that had led him into this little indiscretion. The fair face of Edna Brand arose before him, as if reproachfully; that image decided him. He must extricate himself; but how?

"You do not answer—Sir Iceberg! Can nothing I say—can I do nothing to thaw you?" softly breathed Isabella, nestling closer to his side, looking eagerly into his eyes.

"I am far from being an iceberg, Miss Keyes—"

"Your promise forgotten, already—Miss Keyes!"

"Pardon me; I scarcely know what I am saying or doing. 'Tis growing late: I must go," stammered Mark, dreading a scene.

"Without one word?" And the dark eyes changed their hue.

"Perhaps 'twould be better. Believe me, I am grateful for the confidence you have placed in me—"

"Grateful; and in so cold a tone! I do not ask your gratitude, your sympathy; I ask more, I ask your love! Mark, do you understand me? I love you; love you so madly that I could almost tear you to pieces! Can you understand such love? In this I feel like a tigress, whose caress kills. But, no; you will not understand me! Yet you must; you shall. Mark, I ask little; little to you, but much, oh! so much to me! I beg your love; think of that. I ask nothing more. I will be your slave; only love me a little. I have gold in thousands. We will go far away, where no one knows us, and be—"

Mark arose with a sudden gesture.

"That can never be. I have acted foolishly—criminally, perhaps, led away by my sympathy for your sad story, but this must end now. My heart is no longer my own. I have no love to give you."

For a moment, Isabella cowered before him, pale and ghastly, breathing hard, like one sorely wounded. Then she arose, pale and statuesque.

"You refuse; you scorn my love! This is your answer."

"Not scorn—"

"It is the same. Very well; be it so! You have seen how powerfully I could love; you shall learn how intensely I can hate. You can go now, because you are beneath my roof, and hospitality is sacred, even to the outcast, the degraded being whom you so proudly cast aside. But, Mark Austin, proud as you are, the time will come when, upon your bended knees, you shall beg, as an inestimable boon, the love which you now so scornfully reject. And then—then I will remind you of this night."

She touched a bell, and the giant negro quickly answered the summons. Mark followed his sable conductor in silence.

The impetuous outbreak had awed him, and he felt a dull, heavy weight upon his spirits as he strode through the town.

CHAPTER XV.

HOW OLD BUSINESS "PLAYED IT FINE."

"WE LL do it to-night ef you fellers mind what I say. You, young feller, 'll take a walk out Bald Hill way, while Lengthy here, 'll mosey 'round by way o' Skunk Holler. You'll keep on 'round ontel you strike the point whar Tanglefoot runs into little Sourcrout, you understand?"

Though both Mark Austin and Lafe Pike evidently understood the speech of Old Business, it may not be amiss to explain: Bald Hill was a towering peak some miles to the north-east. Skunk Hollow, thus dubbed from its being a favorite resort of those odoriferous animals. Tanglefoot and little Sourcrout were small streams, the extremely crooked course of the first suggesting its name; the other so called because a Dutchman first struck pickax into its banks.

"And you?" asked Mark, who was looking none the worse for the stormy scene at the Golden Horn, of the night before.

"I can't leave afore night. These varmints won't mind you. It's me they're after. They think they're playin' it fine, sence they hain't lost sight o' me sence that night. But I'll fool 'em to-night. You fellers do as I say. Wait thar fer me, even ef I don't come afore day. It 'pends a good deal on what kind o' a feller I've got to bamboozle, ye see."

"Ain't you pilin' it on rayther thick, old man?" dryly observed Pike. "I've got pritty far 'eyesight, but blamed ef I kin ever ketch sight o' these spies you talk about."

"You hain't bin brung up to kerry your life on your eyelids, as 'twere, or you'd make a better show as a scout, pard. But here—I'll show ye. Put your eye to this hole—bring the squar' rock on a line 'th the blasted tree. You watch the bresh on top o' that rock fer five—"

"Thar's a man hidin' up thar!" exclaimed Pike.

"Jess so—it's the teller they call Black Jack. Now you

see what I mean. That cuss 'll foner me whar ever I go, ontel I throw dust in his eyes, or—rub him out."

"Not that—we've made enemies enough, already," quickly remarked Austin.

"Business is business, young man. I ain't goin' round findin' pockets o' gold fer a set o' or'nary scallawags like them—not much! Ef they try to play bugs on me, somebody's gwine to git fooled—which somebody ain't me, neither. You rest easy. I don't mean to hurt the varmint, but ef I don't jest nat'ally skeer 'im out o' ten years' growth, then you kin chaw me!"

"Well, if all's decided, we might as well be afoot. We'll wait at the two creeks for you, if it's a week from now."

After the departure of his friends Old Business seated himself comfortably, smoking his battered clay pipe with a gusto known only to the true lover of the divine weed. His thoughts seemed pleasant ones. A broad smile now and then widened into an almost inaudible chuckle of intense delight. Evidently there was mischief brewing for the spy.

The sun was just setting when Old Business left the hut, fully armed and equipped as for a hunt. He peered keenly around, in every direction save that where the spy crouched. Then, with the air of one who wishes to escape attention, Old Business glided noiselessly away in a direction that would lead him to Skunk Hollow. A silent chuckle parted his lips as he became aware that Black Jack was already upon his trail.

"He's swallowed the bait—now ef I don't play 'im fer a sucker, o' the biggest kind, hope may die! He thinks all's hunk, now—that I'm goin' to lead him custrut to the pocket. Waal—I will if I do."

Old Business had resolved to teach Black Jack a lesson one which he would not easily forget. Increasing his pace, the hunter strode on as though walking against time, a mischievous devil in his eye as he quite distinctly caught the sounds of his "shadow," who evidently feared losing his game in the darkness. Making abrupt turns, Old Business diverged into nearly every cross-hollow he came to, making a trail full as crooked as that of the celebrated Tanglefoot Creek, and cursing, angry, disgusted at being led upon such a wild-goose chase, Black Jack still followed on, fearing to lose sight of the man who held the precious golden secret, yet half-believing that the old man was only making a fool of him.

Thus it was until the nearly full moon rose above the hill tops, casting a flood of pure light over the earth. The crooked trail had led them nearly back to the shanty in Dick's Pocket, when Old Business proceeded to wind up the farce.

Darting forward with the speed of a deer for nearly a hundred yards, he passed around a thick clump of bushes and halted abruptly. Cursing and panting, the perspiration rolling from his shaggy beard in drops, Black Jack came up on a full run.

With a shrill, eldritch laugh, Old Business sprung out before him, his hair wildly flying, his eyes rolling in their sockets and glowing like living coals.

Black Jack was no coward, and though he was considerably startled, he sprung back a pace and half-drew a revolver.

Placing a finger upon his lips, Old Business advanced with a cat-like tread, his eyes fixed upon vacancy, a white froth dropping from the corners of his mouth.

"Hist—st!" he uttered, in a tragic whisper. "Don't ye hear—the sound o' footsteps—they're comin', comin' to steal away my gold! Look—look, man! Thar's the devil—see his horns, all on fire! An' thar—a-straddle o' the devil's tail—you see that critter? It's king o' the Cannibal Islands! He's drinkin' blood out of a skull—an' playin' the jewsharp with his toes! Hal they see us; no, they're passin' by. Down—hunker down so they won't spot us! Thar—they're gone."

"What ye givin' me, any how?" half-angrily muttered the spy. "Thar wasn't nobody thar."

"St—you want them to ketch us?" gritted Old Business, crouching still lower and holding Black Jack to the ground with a grip of iron. "Thar's more of 'em—glory to Moses! what a string! Look—a-ridin' on that ge-whollopin' pizen sea-sarpent o' the wilderness—it's Queen Sheby, washin' the feet of King Solomon. Thar! didn't the Mormon galoot squeel, though! Reckon the old gal pinched his pet corn. Sweet Canaan! look at Lola Montez a-dancin' 'long o' Ole rickory—I mind, thar—the snakes is comin'—look at 'em! Thousan's an' millions—kill 'em—they're bitin' me—ah—h!"

And Old Business hereupon gave a fine specimen of his abilities in the "ground and lofty tumbling" line, crushing imaginary serpents by scores, growling and snorting like a madman.

Black Jack felt uncomfortable—extremely so. He dare not attempt to retreat, lest such a motion should draw upon him the closer attention of the raving maniac; so he remained motionless, only cocking his revolver, ready for instant use, naturally deeming his own life far more precious than the golden pocket.

At length, as though exhausted by his own fury, Old Business lay motionless, panting heavily. Black Jack believed him insensible, and started to make good his retreat. But the first rustle aroused the hunter. He glanced around like one rudely awakened from a dream. Then he appeared to recognize the spy.

"That you, old man? 'Pears like I've bin dreamin'—I hain't deesturbed you, hev I? Sometimes I git a-talkin' in my sleep—look out, thar! Jump, man—that rattler 'll strike you!" he abruptly cried, pointing to Black Jack's legs. The spy leaped aside with a ludicrous agility.

"You blame fool! thar ain't no snake thar!" he muttered, angrily, with an oath.

"Don't say that, old man—don't go back on a pard, that-a-way!" pleaded Old Business, in a lugubrious tone. "You know they's a snake thar—a rattler bigger 'n my leg!"

"It's all in your eye, old coon," laughed Black Jack, greatly relieved. "Fact is, you've got 'em—got 'em bad, too!"

"Not the—don't say that, old pard!" pleaded Old Business.

"Jim-jams—you've got 'em, sure!" chuckled Black Jack.

"You're tryin' to cod me—hal look yonder! Thar he is—that's him in the brown shirt an' blue britches—you see him crawl in thar? He's bin follerin' me fer a month—but I'll stop it—nobody can't spy on me!" gritted Old Business as he drew a knife and leaped forward like a panther, flinging himself upon a moss-covered log, cutting and thrusting at it, tearing it with his teeth and nails, snorting and foaming like a mad dog.

Black Jack looked on with an air of stupid awe. He began to wish himself clear of the job he had undertaken, but at his first movement, Old Business was beside him, shaking aloft a mass of moss in wild triumph.

"Thar's his skelp—he won't dog me no more—not much! That's my style—Old Business in a minnit! That critter was a fool. He hearn me say as how I'd struck it rich—that I'd found a pocket o' gold, whar the big chunks like brickbats lay thicker'n bugs in a two-bit bed. He wanted to find out my secret—but he didn't—thar's his skelp! Ugh! it's all bloody!" and he flung aside the moss with a convulsive shudder.

"Pard, I feel sick. You ain't got no pizen with ye?"

Mechanically Black Jack produced a flask of whisky, and after a long pull—during which the contents were not perceptibly lowered, however—Old Business seemed better.

"Say, pard, I hain't bin makin' a fool o' myself, hev I? I feel like it, jest now. Fact is—you won't tell nobody—I've bin a little out o' order lately; snakes, ye know, and sich like—git in my boots, ye know, an' make me cut up Jack."

"Did look kinder that way, jest now," replied Black Jack, with a sickly smile. "You 'peared to think somebody was follerin' you—"

"I've got 'em, sure—that's the way they take me, mostly. I think thar's somebody a-follerin' me, an' then I've got to go for 'em—cain't help it. That's what made me leave Wild-cat last month. Jest nat'rally made hash o' a critter down thar. They talked o' lynchin' me—jest as though I could help it! Better lynch the jim-jams—they does it all."

"Feel better now, don't ye?" nervously queried Black Jack. "Don't last long, sich fits, I reckon?"

"Not more'n two weeks gen'ally. To-night's the fust I've bed fer some time. Thar—don't ye hear nothin'? 'Pears like thar's some critter a-follerin' of us."

Old Business crouched to the ground and drew a revolver. After a moment's silence, he added:

"Thar's somebody 'round, but ef they fool 'ith this coon, I reckon thar'll be matter fer a fust-class funeral in these parts afore day. What'd they foller me fer? I hain't wronged 'em in no way. I don't want to hurt 'em, ef I kin help it; but they mustn't foller me—they mustn't foller me!"

With these words he turned and glided down the valley as though he had entirely forgotten the presence of Black Jack. That worthy, nothing loth, followed his example; but in an entirely different direction. He was not in the humor for acting the role of a spy just then—especially on the hunter's trail.

When he realized that his ruse had completely succeeded, Old Business squatted down and indulged in a hearty laugh. Indeed he had "played it fine" on Black Jack.

"Now fer the boys—they'll git tired o' waitin' 'f I don't hurry. Right over this hill 's the nearest trail."

Old Business arose and began the steep ascent. But scarce had he taken a dozen steps when he abruptly paused. A significant sound came to his ears, faintly enough, yet unmistakable, evidently proceeding from the next hollow—from Dick's Pocket.

"Thar's some devntry afoot!" he muttered, rapidly breasting the hill. "Kin it consarn us?"

A few minutes later he reached the brow of the hill and gazed eagerly down into Dick's Pocket. It was indeed a startling scene that met his eyes.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HUE AND CRY.

A YELLING, screaming, cursing, blaspheming crowd—a mob whose evil passions had been fully aroused by artful speeches and free liquor. By the light of the pitch-knot torches they more nearly resembled fiends incarnate than human beings, as they danced around the rude shanty in Dick's Pocket, wild with rage when they fully realized that their anticipated prey had escaped them. It needed but a word—a word very quietly spoken by a handsome, graceful figure clad in somber black—and then strong hands closed upon the brush shanty, tearing it apart, flinging the poles and brush in a pile into which several blazing torches were thrust.

Such was the scene that met the startled gaze of Old Business as he paused upon the hill-crest.

"The devil's to pay now, shore enough!" he muttered, a shade of indecision settling upon his brow. "Them's Windy

Gapers—I kin make out Pacific Pete an' that Eli Brand, as he calls hisself. They're jest more'n red-hot—what in thunder kin be up, anyhow? They mean business—that's plain, an' I reckon it's jest as well we wasn't none o' us to home when they called. Shouldn't wonder ef they was mean enough to rake up that little muss t'other night, though we only fit in self-defense. Hal! thar goes that pesky Brand—what's he tryin' to git through 'im, anyhow?"

Eli Brand had sprung upon a convenient boulder, and in a loud voice commanded attention. The wild tumult was in a measure quelled, and the rough crowd gathered around as though eager to hear the promised speech.

"Gentlemen—one word with you. Some of you asked for proof. That was well enough. It is always best to be sure we are right, in such cases. Look around you—is there not proof enough before your eyes? These men were here this morning—where are they now? Gone—ay! and in such haste that they have left their tools behind them! That is proof enough to convict a thousand, I can—"

"Lie like the devil—I don't know what you're talkin' 'bout, Eli Brand—sence that's the name you go by jest now—but I know you're tellin' a dog-gone double an' twisted lie!"

Eli Brand stared in open-mouthed amazement at this unceremonious interruption, and despite his being surrounded by a strong force of friends, he visibly quailed as he recognized in the audacious speaker, Old Business.

The old hunter had rapidly descended the hillside, and paused within two-score yards of the excited crowd. Leaning carelessly against a boulder that guarded all save his head and shoulders, his rifle resting before him, ready for instant use, Old Business gazed placidly down upon the mob of Windy Gapers. The glow of the bonfire clearly revealed him to the angry eyes below, and a wild yell of execration followed his recognition.

"Kill him—cut his heart out—put him in the fire an' roast 'im ontel he 'fesses!"

Such were a few of the fierce exclamations that followed the characteristic speech of Old Business, but he never flinched before the storm, nor even seemed to notice it, except by loosening a revolver.

"Easy, thar, boys—kinder easy! 'Tain't healthy to git so awful red-hot—ye're bound to ketch cold a'terwards. You little cuss in the ragged shirt—drap that weepin! Don't ye got no manners a-tall? D'y' want me to plug ye?"

Old Business flung forward his rifle, and it seemed as though a tragedy must inevitably follow. Doubtless such would have been the case only for the prompt interference of Pacific Pete, who boldly sprung between the leveled weapons before either could be discharged.

"Stand back, Barton—and you, old man, if you really value your life, you will be a little less hasty. Please remember that we hold the winning hand just now, and govern yourself accordingly. You understand?"

"I've hearn you talk afore to-day, laddy-buck. I hold better keerds than you think, mebbe. But go on with your camp-meetin'. Le's hear what all this rumpus is about, anyhow; time enough fer our little game a'terward."

"You really pretend not to know what we are after here?" cried Pacific Pete, and if his surprise was not genuine, it proved him an admirable actor.

"I ain't one o' the pretendin' sort. Old Business is my name, an' business is my natur', too, chuck up; you hear me talk! 'F I knowed what you war a'ter, I wouldn't ax. You're tryin' some sort o' skin-game, but that's all I do know."

"What have you done with Miss Edna Brand—where have you hidden her? you and your comrades in crime!" sharply cried Pacific Pete.

For a moment Old Business stood like one petrified; his mouth and eyes wide open. He could scarce believe his ears. Like many a better organized court, the mob of Windy Gapers misinterpreted his surprise, and believed it conscious guilt. Again their wild yell filled the air, sounding along the valleys, reverberating from point to point—the deadly, merciless cry for blood.

"Yelp on, ye 'tarnal screech-owls o' perdition—ye two-legged, bob-tailed curs o' the free-lunch route—squeel on untel ye split your muzzles an' bu'sts yer b'ilers! It's on'y one man you're skyugling at, but he's a whale on crutches—he's a two-legged pepper-box; one smell at 'im, and you'll sneeze tell you blow your brains out! Them's me—little Old Business in a minnit—you bet!"

"Mount 'im! why don't ye jist climb him?" yelled Barton, a little, ragged miner, whose courage decidedly shamed that of some of his larger comrades, only Pacific Pete held his revolver hand, firmly.

"Mount me—the outamed mule o' the Rockies, the cavortin' jackrabbit, the green-tailed squeeze, who was foaled by a yairthquake, an' sired by old Harry Cane, hisself! Whar's the man so owdacious, the two men, the half dozen or more two-legged bedbugs as dar' tempt to ride me?"

"The galoot is clean gone crazy!" cried one of the crowd.

"Pent, sinner, 'pent!" twanged forth Old Business, who, though still holding himself in readiness to play the part of a man, if worst came to worst, knew full well that the first shot or blow dealt, would undoubtedly prove his death-warrant. "Pent, sinners, 'pent? You's gwine on the lightnin' 'spress to the devil, whar they feed ye on b'ilin' brimstone with scoop-shovels. Now's your chaince; this is the 'cepted time. You, Hank Hurley, drap that; drap it, I tell ye, or I'll send ye bug-buntin'!"

"Hold! peace, I say; I command it!" screamed Pacific

Pete, leaping upon a bowlder, and drawing a revolver. "I'm running this institution just now, and I tell you, the first man that burns a grain of powder, or strikes a blow until I give the word, had better say his prayers beforehand, for I'll kill him, if it's the last act of my life!"

"Good enough, boss. I didn't think *you'd* go back on a' old pard, when the pinch kem, no, I didn't," coolly observed Old Business, with a broad grin.

"My advice to *you*, old man, is to put a bridle on your tongue, and not bray so loud. It's bad for the health—just now in particular. You understand me?"

"I mought, banty, if you'd speak plainer. I reckon you've got me a little mixed up, 'ith some other feller. I'm a powerful exhorter, when my bellers is fresh 'iled up, an' when I come to 'late my 'speri'nce—thar's whar I makes the wood fly. F'r instance; fifteen y'ar ago, more or less, in Saint Louey—"

"Enough; drop that nonsense, or by all that's good I'll give the word to tear the chattering tongue from your jaws! We haven't come here for idle talk; we mean business. Come down here and answer our questions. If you can prove your innocence, you shall not be harmed—I give you my word of honor."

"Stake's too big for the s'curity, boss," chuckled Old Business, with an audacity that made Big Tom Noxon stare aghast. "'F it's all the same to the honorable comp'ny, this coon 'll keep his posish, jest whar he is. Now go on with your rat-killin'."

"You'll not gain anything by being insolent, let me tell you, old man. But have your way. We can reach you as easily where you are, if need be. Eli Brand, state your case."

Brand stepped forward, and some of the men flung fresh brushwood upon the fire, so that the bright glow plainly revealed the peculiar scene.

"I accuse this man, and his confederates—Mark Austin, and Lafe Pike—of abducting my daughter, Edna Brand!" distinctly uttered the man, and a sullen roar of angry vengeance came from the crowd, deadly and vindictive enough to have cowed many a bold heart; but Old Business didn't change countenance, as he replied:

"Eli Brand, you lie wuss than you did in the year '50, when Gospel Dick was—found. But go on. Le's hear the rest on it; then I'll speak."

"Frank Hurley is my witness," muttered Brand, in a hoarse, strained voice, as he slunk back from the fire.

"Speak up, man, and tell what you know about it," sharply cried Pacific Pete, as the dark-browed ruffian advanced.

"It's short an' sweet, boss. Hellow, Black Jack, whar'd you come from?" he cried, as that worthy put in an appearance, having, like Old Business, been attracted thither by the tumult. "But I was sayin'; this evenin', I was out takin' a walk for my health. Fact is, I'd bin drunker'n a b'iled owl, the night afore—"

"Stick to the text; cut it short, friend," cried Pacific Pete.

"Edzactly. I was walkin' on the hill, north o' town, when I sighted the lady, Miss Brand. At that minnit, when I was lookin' at her, three or'nary galoots lepped out o' the bresh an' corraled her. I giv' a yell, an' made for 'em, but like a fool, I'd left my weepins at the shanty, while they was well heeled. They burned some powder; sp'iled my hat hyer, anyhow; an' knowin' they over-held me, I cut for town a'ter help."

"You say I was with 'em, smarty?"

"Yes; you an' Gentleman Mark, an' Long Pike. I kin take my Bible oath on it!" declared Hurley.

"'Bout what time was this?"

"Just afore sundown. But I didn't come hyar to answer your questions, old snoozer!"

"I reckon you've answered enough. You kin squat down, pritty. You, Black Jack, stan' up thar; you're my witness. Stan' up thar, unless you want some more jim-jams. Now, you tell these gentlemen that we three men, as you accuse o' gal-stealin', was right thar in that shanty, ontill full sunset. You know it. You was watchin' us from the top o' that rock yender. Speak out."

"'Tis a darned lie; I wasn't!" muttered Black Jack. "But s'posin' I was? you killed Devil's Frank, anyhow, an' right hyer's whar you planted his karkidge!"

This fierce announcement was the last straw. The mob burst all bonds, then. Yelling and screaming, they made a mad rush toward Old Business. But he was no less quick. Crack, crack! his revolver quickly followed the report of his rifle, and Black Jack uttered a horrible yell of agony as he fell back, shot dead, and beside him quivered Hank Hurley, the foresworn witness, a bullet through his heart.

With a taunting laugh, Old Business fled up the hill, closely followed by the yelling, infuriated mob, whose pistols popped at every step.

Over the picturesque rocks and crags, over the blood-stained bodies lying there so still and motionless, their pain distorted features rendered doubly repulsive by the flickering shadows, and ruddy glow of the firelight. Over the swarm of yelling, cursing, infuriated men, as they scramble up the steep hillside, their progress marked by the quick puffs of flame-tinted smoke. And the sharp reports of firearms rattle and reverberate through the hills.

"One man fleeing from full two score; one man fighting for life and liberty; two score men thirsting for his blood."

Truly, it is a race for high stakes.

In that swift, backward glance, Old Business read enough for his purpose. He laughed half scornfully, as a bullet whistled past his ear, with that peculiar ragged hum imparted to a bit of soft lead, when forced through a deep-grooved bore. Knowing right well, how very few are the men capable of shooting by moonlight, even at a stationary target, he felt little fear of being picked off unless by a chance shot. Fleetness of foot, skillful doubling and dodging must decide the race.

Despite the odds against him, Old Business was perfectly cool and collected. No man knew better than he how essential it was for him to "keep his head"—to take advantage of every point, to decide on the instant and execute promptly.

After that one rapid but comprehensive glance, the fugitive turned abruptly to the right, running lightly down the ridge, dodging round bowlders and trees, leaping over holes and bushes, running in silence, with an ease and smoothness as it were, vastly different from the yelling, panting mob behind him.

He followed the ridge for quite half a mile. His pursuers were by this time pretty well strung out in his rear, though several were close at his heels. Since making that abrupt turn Old Business had headed direct for Windy Gap, but he smiled grimly as he read aright the exultant yells of his pursuers. He had no intention of running into a trap—not he.

Putting on a spurt, Old Business darted ahead at a terrific rate, descending the slight slope at breakneck speed. This slope, together with a corresponding rise, near a hundred yards beyond, had given the ridge its name, "Swayback."

When he reached the lowest point of the depression, Old Business sprung rapidly aside and prostrated himself beneath a clump of bushes, trusting to remain unobserved in the deep shadow.

One after another his pursuers came dashing down the slope, their worst passions fully aroused by the protracted race. One by one they passed by the covert of the panting fugitive and darted up the incline, doubtless fancying some of the fantastic shadows beyond was their anticipated victim, instead of the weird creations of the moonlight shimmering through the redwood and cedar trees.

"Go it, ye sinners," muttered Old Business. "A look at the back is the best part o' sech or'nary critters as you—glory to Moses! sweet Corneille!"

A man, who was descending the slope with more speed than prudence, lost control of himself, and "left his feet," in more than one sense, when nearly opposite the clump of bushes behind which the old hunter lay.

Tripping, he plunged heavily forward, much as a diver takes a "header," and crashed through the clump of bushes, alighting fairly on the back of Old Business. Two of the mine who had been close behind the unfortunate yelled out something as they passed by, but did not stop, evidently fearing to lose time, lest they should also lose the chance of being in at the death.

For a moment or two Old Business was confused and half-stunned. The blundering miner had fallen heavily upon him, driving his head forward into the soft earth, filling both eyes and mouth. Rebounding, the miner had rolled off several feet, and was now trying to yell, curse and regain his breath at one and the same time.

This curious combination of sounds, more than aught else, restored Old Business' cool decision. Fearing that some of the straggling pursuers would pause to investigate the cause of the uproar, he scrambled forward and knelt astride the kicking, squirming figure, clutching his neck with both hands, his sinewy fingers abruptly checking the spluttering yells and curses.

"Shet up, ye pesky reptile!" gritted Old Business, retaining his seat despite the convulsive kickings and struggles of the blundering miner. "Don't ye got no more manners then to make sech a dog-gone owdacious rumpuss 'bout nothin'? D'y' want to 'larm the hull kentry—bring out the fire-engines and wake up the p'lic? Shet up—I'll squeeze ye into the middle o' next week! Ye won't, eh? I reckon ye'd better—yas, I do so!"

Old Business compressed his fingers with all his power, and lay motionless as a log on top of his luckless captive, for he heard more of his pursuers plunging down the hillside. It was a critical moment, but fortunately the captive was choked into submission, if not insensibility, and the heavy footed miners passed by, unsuspecting how narrowly they were missing their prey.

Old Business lost no time in dragging his prisoner back to the clump of bushes, and, when once there, relaxed his fierce grip in time to avoid murdering the man, though still in readiness to cut short any attempt at an alarm.

"It's you, is it, banty?" he muttered, peering keenly into the miner's face. "The little cuss Pacific Pete called Barton. You wanted to shoot me back thar, too, didn't ye? Waal, I've got ye now. What shall I do wi' ye? What'd ye do ef you was in my place?"

CHAPTER XVII

A RACE FOR HIGH STAKES.

"Now, legs, do your duty; them fellers mean business, you bet!"

These words broke almost unconsciously from the lips of Old Business, as he momentarily paused upon the crest of the hill, and glanced keenly back toward Dick's Pocket.

The blazing brush-heap cast its lurid light over the scene.

your brains out—though that a be too good a or'nary gal-stealer like you," growled little Bar-whose courage was by no means to be measured by his body.

"Jess so—ef I was that critter. But I ain't, pard—no. I ain't got so low, quite. You needn't b'lieve me—I don't s'pose ye would, even ef I was to sw'ar to it—but this hull business is a put-up job on us fellers, by Pacific Pete and that Brand feller, 'cause they think we know'd too much for the good o' thar health. You'll find 'em out afore long. Mebbe it'll l'arn you a lesson not to b'lieve what every foo-

says—"

"I don't—so you mought as well cheese it."

"You're sharp—sharp as soft soap, an' twict as nasty! 'Twouldn't be safe fer you to run 'round loose. Fer the good o' mankind, reckon I'd better put a muzzle on ye. Don't like to—no, I don't. You'll get mad, mebbe, an' cuss me. That 'd hurt my feelin's powerful. 'Spect I'd go into 'a collapse."

While talking Old Business was not idle. He knew that his ruse might be discovered at any moment, when the crowd would probably take the back track, or else scatter and search the range thoroughly in hopes of stumbling upon his hiding-place or across his trail. Rapid flight, then, would be his best safeguard. But first Barton must be disposed of. At no time a bloodthirsty man, Old Business would have risked his life twice over rather than injure his captive, whose bold words had strongly interested him.

"I'm sorry, but it cain't be helped," he muttered, quietly, as with his knife he unceremoniously cut several strips from the miner's dilapidated breeches. "Your rig is a good summer suit—light an' airy; it's a pity to spile 'em. But what kin I do? Ye see, I'm 'vited to a big-bug ball, an' 'twouldn't do fer me to spile my dress suit. Thar—open your mouth—I don't want to squeeze ye, but ef I must—so! Don't it taste nice? Waal, that's your fault—should wash 'em ofener. However, dirt's healthy—jest think o' thet an' 'twon't taste hafe so bad. Thar! you're fixed up sniptious ef I do say it. You're a lucky cuss, you be! Jess think! All you've got to do is to lay hyer, like a bump on a log, ontel you get tired—an' as much longer as you like. You don't hev to work, nur to drink, nur eat, nur do nuthin' but lay still an' do nuthin'. Mebbe I'll call on ye, in a week or so, ef I don't fergit it. Ef I should, you jist holler an' let me know."

Leaving Barton bound, gagged, and perfectly helpless, Old Business picked up his weapons and glided silently down the hill. He felt no compunctions at leaving his captive in this way, knowing full well that some of his friends would assuredly find and release him, when they came to search for the lost trail by daylight.

After breaking his trail thoroughly in the creek, Old Business lit out for the appointed rendezvous at his best gait, knowing that Pike and Mark would be uneasy at his long delay.

Indistinct mutterings fell from his lips; vague allusions to Pacific Pete, Eli Brand and Edna—he seemed greatly troubled. Little wonder. Were this false accusation generally believed, that section of the country would be made too hot for them. Only speedy flight could save them—capture meant a sudden and ignominious death.

The night was far spent when Old Business reached the rendezvous, and his signal was promptly responded to. But what was his astonishment when Lufe Pike alone greeted him. Where was Mark?

"Don't know," replied Pike. "Hain't see'd hair nor hide o' him sence we left the shanty. He hain't bin hyar—that's sartin. I hed the shortest trail, an' he couldn't 'a' out-traveled me. Ef he'd 'a' come, I'd 'a' hearn him. Mebbe he mistook the place?"

"Tain't likely. I told him 'stinctly the peint whar Tanglefoot run into Little Sourcrot. Mebbe he's hed trouble—all hell's afoot to-night!" and he hurriedly explained what had transpired at Dick's Pocket.

"S'pose they've ketched him?" faltered Pike, uneasily.

"Ef they hev, an' hurt comes to the lad, thar'll be lively doin's in these diggins, you hear me! The cusses 'll hev more business on thar hands than they kin 'tend to—that's swored to!"

"You kin count me in," slowly said Pike. "I knowed the lad's folks in the East—afere my troubles—an' won't go back on him. Seems like he was my own child?"

"I thought I could count on you, old man," was the hunter's only reply.

The hours wore slowly by. The moon sunk behind the hills, and the darkness that heralds the coming dawn settled over the earth. Silent and motionless the two men waited—waited for the comrade whom fate had decreed should never keep the rendezvous—for the signal his lips were fated never to utter.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LONG PIKE TAKES A LESSON IN WOODCRAFT.

"THAT settles it!" ejaculated Old Business, with a long-drawn breath. "It couldn't speak no plainer ef we was to wait here ontel the last crack o' doom!"

Long Pike made no audible reply, only lifted his head as the old hunter spoke, then resumed his position, his chin rest-

ing moodily upon his hands as he stared vacantly at nothing. Hour after hour had crept by since they met at the rendezvous—hours of weary, painful suspense—yet nothing had been seen of Mark. They knew that death was abroad in the forest that night. With that black charge hanging over their heads—while the honest portion of the Windy Gapers believed them guilty of abducting Edna Brand—punishment would swiftly follow capture. This was the fear that assailed the two friends—that Mark, unsuspecting danger, had fallen into the hands of the enraged miners.

"Look here, pard," sharply cried Old Business, his hand falling heavily upon Pike's shoulder. "That's played out. You brace up, brush the cobwebs outen your eyes, an' be a man, or durned ef I don't mount ye an' chaw your ear like pizen—you hear me!"

"What do you want with me?" the old miner asked, as he arose painfully from his cramped position. "You haven't hearn nothin' of Mark?"

"No, nur I don't reckon we will, nuther, ef we stay here tell the cows come home," was the testy reply. "Sugar in a rag! won't ye wake up?—you act jest like ye was fast asleep wi' yer eyes open!"

"Yes—I have been asleep—dreaming of the past—the dead past," muttered Pike, passing one hand slowly across his face. "Yes—it must have been a dream, for she's dead—dead years ago."

"What 're you tryin' to git through ye, anyhow?" muttered Old Business, his fingers closing tightly upon Pike's arm. "What ye bin dreamin' about—who's she, anyhow?"

"My child—little Helen. I saw her to-night—last night, I mean," softly uttered the old man.

"I knowed it!" and the hunter's eyes flashed. "Say, pard, how mought ye be called, when you're to hum, anyhow?"

"My name's Pike—Lufe Pike, which is sometimes made Lengthy, fer short, 'cause I'm so tall. You ain't bin drinkin', old man?"

A shade crept over the face of Old Business. He was plainly disappointed at the abrupt change in his comrade, who now appeared his usual self. But he adroitly masked his feelings, whatever they were, and said:

"I don't reckon thar's much use in our waitin' here any longer. Ef the lad war comin' a-tall he'd bin here afore now. Thar's only one reason: he's got into trouble somehow, somewhere. That's what we must find out; an' the sooner we set about it, the quicker we'll git done."

"Listen, pard," said Pike, touching Old Business on the arm. "I ain't much on the talk—never was, an' then I've passed through enough in my time to sour a preacher. But I kin foller a lead as fur as the next man. You cain't guess the hafe what Mark has bin to me, nur the hafe what I'd willin'ly go through fer his sake. Ef them durned mole-eyed galoots hev captered him, we must git him free, no matter what's the odds. Ef they've did him hurt—waaal, a' under taker 'd make his 'pendent fortune in these parts at a dollar a head fer plantin' karkidges—you hear me!"

"We'll go cahoots in that, Lengthy. But whar's the use in borrowin' trouble long's we've got a stake left? The fust thing is to find out what hes really happened. How kin we do that? By strikin' the lad's trail an' follerin' it to the end."

"You'll hev to play a lone hand thar, pard. I couldn't trail a sick kitten to-day. My head's chuck full o' cobwebs, but I'll do my best."

"You kin keep a look-out fer snags—that's all you need do; I'll tend to the rest. Talk 'bout trackin' a muskeeter or a bungle-bee on a dark night—I kin do it, ten times out o' nine, an' never faze a ha'r! That's right whar I live, it is! You jest come 'long o' me, an' ef I don't teach you a lesson in woodcraft, you kin chaw my ear fer a month, an' I'll never kick."

Though Old Business spoke in a confident tone, and continued his whimsical remarks as they strode rapidly along, his mind was far from being at ease. He knew that something serious must have occurred to keep Mark from the rendezvous, and he feared that the young man had fallen in with some of the enraged miners from Windy Gap. If so, Austin must have been captured or killed, since his absence could in no other way be accounted for.

Yet, despite his deep interest in the matter, Old Business went systematically to work, with a cool, steady judgment that left nothing essential undone.

"Now, pard," he said, as they paused upon a rocky ridge, "right here's whar our headwork must begin. You spoke o' cobwebs in your brain; ef thar's any in your eyes, you must brush 'em out. This is nasty ground to trail over, an' I reckon my hands 'll be full, 'thout lookin' out fer humans. You must do this—you understand?"

"You kin count on me. I'm all right now. 'Twas jist one o' my old spells tuck me. Sometimes I reckon I'll go clean crazy like—"

"Like who?" asked Old Business, as Pike abruptly paused.

"Like anybody. I reckon we'd better be movin'. We're burnin' daylight," was the sharp reply.

"Good enough! but I'll trail ye yet," muttered the old hunter, his eyes glowing. "You understand, then? I'm to trail, while you kiver me."

Pike nodded, and then the comrades passed down to the valley, keeping well covered, though there were no signs to create uneasiness. Then, motioning Pike to keep in the rear, Old Business slowly crossed the valley in a zig-zag line. On his return, he paused, bent low down and glided along a few paces, then beckoned to Pike.

"The boy was safe enough when he passed 'long here, 't anyrate," he said, quietly.

"You only guess at it," said Pike, impatiently, after a careful examination of the flinty ground. "A elephant's foot couldn't make no print here!"

"Mark ain't no elephant, though he's a hoss in some things. Yit here's his trail—ef not plain as the nose on your mug, still it's a fa'r trail consid'ring. Now to my eyes, thar's the prent of his right foot, plain as daylight. Here's the toe—it turned over that bit o' flint an' pressed that one deeper down. You see this—thar's whar a nail in his boot-heel scratched the stone. Thar is only one trail. 'Twas made last night, 'cause the dew has fell on it. We know Mark 'lowed to come this way; put this an' that together, an' you've got the answer."

"You may be right—I reckon ye air, though I don't know much 'bout sech doin's; but le's push on. I can't rest easy ontel I know what's come to the boy."

"All right; I ain't much ahind ye on *that* point, anyhow. You jist keep a good lookout—I reckon them galoots I fooled so slick last night, 'll be on the hunt fer me to-day, an' ef they spot us fust, it's good-by, John!"

A few hundred yards further on, Old Business paused, with a grunt of satisfaction, and pointed to the ground just before him. There, upon a little patch of ground, kept moist by a tiny spring that bubbled from beneath a huge boulder, was a clearly defined footprint.

"You was right—that's his foot!" cried Pike, eagerly. "Look thar—I put that patch on myself!" and he pointed out a rude outline, where the boot-sole had been mended.

"Jist so it satisfies you—I hadn't no doubt from the fust," quietly replied Old Business; but then his countenance suddenly changed.

A little to the right, just at the edge of the moist ground, he detected another trail. Springing forward he knelt down and closely scrutinized the tell-tale prints.

"What is it? what do ye make out?" muttered Pike, buskily, great drops of perspiration starting out upon his face.

"Somebody's bin here, not hafe a hour afore or ahind the lad. Three—no, thar's four. One wore moccasins—two hed on heavy boots—t'other hed—ge-thunder!"

Old Business stared like one in a dream for several moments, then hurriedly fumbled in his pockets, paying no attention to the anxious questions of Pike. From among a little bundle of simliar ones, he produced a skin thong, half cut through in several places. This, which appeared to be a measure, of some sort, he carefully compared with a faintly outlined track in the moist earth. Then he arose, his face sternly set, his eyes filled with a strange fire as he turned toward Pike.

"Thar's more deviltry afoot than I thought, old man. We've got two bits o' work cut out fer us."

"What is it? Why don't ye speak out, d— it?"

"I thought that Brand cuss was lyin' last night, but sure as you're a livin' sinner, his gal passed by hyar, with three men, not half an hour from Mark. We've got to find out what it means—"

"Mark first; what's the gal to us?"

"More'n you think, mebbe. But I reckon the two trails won't be fur apart. I don't *know*, but I feel it—somethin' tells me that this trail, or rather them what made it, is the cause o' Mark failin' us. But thar—come on."

In silence the two men followed the double trail. They were too anxious for idle speech. Along the valley they glided, Old Business picking up the trail with an ease and skill that was little short of marvelous. Then the valley widened, and became more open, with less undergrowth and boulders. Here and there grew small clumps of trees, and a soft carpet of grass made the work of trailing considerably easier.

"Looks like the lad was follerin' *them*," muttered Old Business, pointing out where Austin's footprints overlapped the others. "Ef he's sighted 'em, you kin 'pend on it, he's got into trouble a-tryin' to help the gal."

"Cuss her—" angrily began Pike, when Old Business fiercely interrupted him.

"Shet up—don't you cuss her; think o' the child *pou* hev lost; cusses come home to the one who speaks 'em."

Awed into silence by the storm he had invoked, Pike held his peace, though still muttering angrily beneath his breath.

"I knowed it! See thar—the trail goes into that pass," and Old Business paused at the mouth of a narrow, thickly-wooded defile. "The boy was trailin' the gal, as I guessed."

It was difficult trailing, but the old hunter was equal to the task. Yard by yard he picked up the trail—then he paused, with a sharp cry, his eyes dilated, his face ghastly pale, as he pointed to a pool of blood upon the flinty ground. Around were traces of a struggle. The trunk of a tree, as well as the stem of a stout bush bore fresh bullet-marks. There could be no doubt. A tragedy had taken place at that point. These significant signs, coupled with Austin's strange absence, told plainly that Mark had been the victim.

"My God!" gasped Pike. "This is the end!"

"No," was the harsh reply; "the only end for us is—VEN-GEANCE!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PHANTOM TRAIL.

FOR some time after leaving Dick's Pocket, Mark Austin kept his every sense upon the alert, and cunning indeed must have been the spy who could have dogged his footsteps without discovery. But then, as he saw nothing to awaken, or rather to keep alive his suspicions, and as the shades of night descended around him, he grew less cautious, and finally passed into the opposite extreme.

In truth he had much to think about, many things to occupy his mind. The past two weeks had been eventful ones. He had become curiously involved with two women, one of whom he believed he loved truly and sincerely; yet the other exercised a strange fascination over him, even now, since he had chosen between her love and hatred. Despite his stout nerves, a chill crept over him as he recalled her last words—"You have seen how powerful I could love—you shall learn how intensely I can hate!"

Then came thoughts of the old man who had so queerly become associated with him and his partner. In vain did Mark endeavor to satisfy the vague suspicion that they had met before—that Old Business was not the entire stranger he would fain have them believe. In vain he racked his brain. Though feeling almost positive that they had met and known each other at some period of the past, he could not rend the misty veil that obscured his memory.

Then again would his thoughts revert to Edna Brand. He saw now what he could not bring himself to confess, on that delicious afternoon, spent beneath the redwood tree, upon Swayback, that the fair maiden had built for herself a nest in his heart of hearts—that he loved her truly and earnestly. Well, the days would pass by rapidly enough, and on the coming Sabbath he was to meet her once more, beneath the redwood. And then—even in the darkness of night, Mark's cheek flushed and his eyes sparkled brightly—he would be brave, would soon know his fate for good or ill.

"Ha! what's that?"

In an instant the young miner was himself again, and fully upon the alert as he crouched down beside a cedar shrub, clutching his rifle with a steady hand. Clear and distinct there had come to his ears the sound of a heavy footstep, a sound such as is made when one steps unexpectedly into a hollow which though the descent may be less than a dozen inches, jars a body even more than would a calculated leap of as many feet. Accompanying the sound was a half-stifed exclamation or curse, enough to put Mark fully upon the alert after the remarks of Old Business.

"Some one dogging me, sure enough!" he muttered, listening intently.

But he could hear nothing. The sound had broken so unexpectedly that he could not locate it, though, naturally enough, he reasoned, if he was being dogged the sound must have come from behind. Then, as he heard nothing further he cautiously glided ahead, making as little noise as possible, listening keenly for further signs of his pursuers.

He passed over fully half a mile of ground without hearing anything to confirm his suspicions, and then, believing that he had succeeded in throwing the spies off his trail, he pressed forward with more rapidity, lest he should be late at the rendezvous.

His present course lay along a narrow, almost straight valley, comparatively free of undergrowth, though studded here and there with clumps of trees. The moon cast a clear light down the valley. Except when in the shadow cast by the trees, a person passing along this valley could be easily kept in view by a pursuer. After what had occurred, Mark hesitated about exposing himself so fully. Pausing beneath a bushy tree, he glanced keenly around. Not a sound came from the back trail. But as he gazed along the valley he gave a slight start and leaned eagerly forward.

Before him, several hundred yards distant, he could just make out several indistinct, phantom-like figures, gliding noiselessly along, steadily increasing the distance between them and their interested observer.

"They've missed me, and think I've hurried on," muttered Mark, with a grim chuckle. "Well, they're going my way, so I may as well turn the tables and play spy for the nonce."

Cautiously gliding out until he placed a clump of trees between him and the objects of his curiosity, Mark ran swiftly forward, almost upon tiptoe, so that his foot gave forth scarcely any echo. Twice he followed this plan, and then, peering forth from his covert, he saw the party standing just upon the edge of a little grove which grew at the mouth of a narrow pass or defile running at right angles with the valley.

"You kin take your choice," were the first words that met Mark's ears. "Either walk quietly, or else we'll hev to kerry you—an' that wouldn't be comf'table to n'ither on us."

"I'll walk—only tell me where you are taking me? What have I done to deserve this treatment?"

Mark started, and a little exclamation broke from his lips. He could scarcely believe his ears, and yet the voice was assuredly a woman's!

"That's none o' your business, nur of mine nuther," was the reply. "We've got to 'bey orders, an' you've got to 'bey us, or take the consequences, which mightn't be 'greeable. You've did bully so fur—hev come 'long like a led sheep—so don't spile it all by gittin' rambunctious this time o' day. It cain't do ye no good—you've got sense enough to see that. Ef you take to kickin' up an' gittin' over the traces, why, we'll jest put a gag in your purty mouth an' tote ye 'long on our shoulders."

"You have the power now, but the time will come when you and your vile employers—"

"Oh, cheese it!" impatiently interrupted another voice. "Come on—we've wasted too much time already."

The shadows moved on and disappeared from view in the gloom that shrouded the mouth of the pass. And after a little hesitation, Mark Austin glided cautiously along upon their trail, little dreaming to what it was fated to lead him.

The gloom of night, doubly dense in that deep, narrow pass, shut down over the young miner. Eyesight was of little avail here; he must rather trust to the sense of touch. The cool branches brushed his face. His feet tripped over uneven projections in the trail. More than once he left the narrow path, and never knew it until he brought up against a tree-trunk or some huge boulder.

At such times he would pause and listen breathlessly, fearful lest the noise thus made had betrayed him to his phantom friends in front. But all was still. Only the far-away sighing of the night wind among the trees and bushes growing high above him. Not a breath of air stirred the shrubs around him. Not a sound came from before him. Had the rough-speaking men become aware that they were followed, and were they even then lying in wait for him? Or were they, taking advantage of their knowledge of the dark trail, steadily gaining upon him?—was he wasting his time to no good end.

Truly, the young miner was upon a phantom trail.

"I'll follow it until it's settled in one way or another," doggedly muttered Mark, as he once more resumed his blind progress, a hand upon his trusty revolver, ready for offense or defense, as the case might require.

On now with increased haste. Hearing nothing to guide him, Mark fell into that common error—so easily made; just when he should have displayed more caution he lessened it. We have all met with illustrations of this fact. I remember one which occurred only the other day. A number of pin-tailed grouse had settled near the middle of a large field of corn stubble. The weather was cold, the wind high, and they were very wild. A lad was attempting to gain a shot at them. He lay flat upon his stomach, creeping along over the frozen snow, frequently pausing behind a corn-hill. But as he drew near the covered game he lost his coolness. Only a few yards more and he would be within range of the huddling birds, whose long necks were already high in the air, their suspicions aroused. Interested in the sight, I found myself calling to the lad—"Easy—easy, there!" But the mischief was done—the grouse sailed away like the wind, and the lad lost his shot.

A digression, very true. Yet it so aptly applies in Mark's case that I hope for pardon. Like the young hunter, he displayed true skill in the first portion of his "stalk," but he, too, grew excited and impatient just when he stood more than ever in need of coolness and caution.

In his haste, now, he alarmed the game. They heard his blundering footsteps, and increased their own pace, hoping to gain a point from whence they could take an observation without risk to themselves.

Mark stumbled and fell over a stone. As he lay still and listened breathlessly, fearful lest he had alarmed the game, he heard the faint sound of footfalls beyond—a little exclamation—then all was still.

These sounds did not tell him much; only that his game was still afoot and not far in advance. He saw, too, that he had been foolishly incautious. When he arose, he glided on noiselessly as a phantom. But the harm was already wrought.

A few moments later and he caught sight of the group, just crossing a narrow belt of moonlight at a barren point in the defile. At that instant he saw the woman turn her head. The clear moonlight fell upon the pale, anxious face. A sharp cry broke from his lips as he leaped out into the open ground.

Like magic the group faded from view.

But then a dazzling glare lighted up the fringe of bushes. Mark staggered back, with a half-stifled cry. The hot hand of a giant seemed tearing at his heart. His brain seemed on fire. He saw a dark form leaping toward him with uplifted weapon. Mechanically he drew a revolver and fired. Then what seemed a clap of thunder smote upon his brain. He fell heavily to the ground, the pistol dropping from his nerveless hand.

His appearance was that of a dead man; yet he felt more like a man in a dream. There was a vague, half-consciousness. He felt rough hands upon him. He heard, indistinctly, far-off, dreamy sounds, as of men talking. He knew that he was being borne along in some manner, through the defile, into another valley, over rough and intricate ground. He strove to speak, but in vain. And then insensibility seemed to steal over him.

The next he remembered was being rudely flung down upon the ground. He heard sounds as of men digging—of removing earth and stones. The horrible thought struck him—they were going to bury him—and he still living! Yet he was helpless. Another shock—a fall; then came a sense of suffocation, of horrible pain—all was a blank.

CHAPTER XX.

OLD BUSINESS CAPTURES A PRIZE.

"BRACE up, man—don't play woman now," muttered Old Business, as he shook Pike by the shoulder. "Things looks bad just now, but who knows—it may clear up all right, a'ter all, ef we only think so."

"No—the hand of fate is in it," huskily muttered Pike, as he crouched down beside the tell-tale blotch of blood. "I loved him—that was enough. There is a curse upon me—a black curse that spares nothing—ever since that fearful night when I awoke and found my hands red with blood—my God! can I never forget—never run away from that horrible sight, that haunting spirit!"

With a cry—almost a yell of agonizing remorse, the miner groveled upon the ground like one in a fit. Old Business sprang back a pace, his rifle pointing toward the writhing figure, a strange look upon his face.

"Trailed home at last!"

The words dropped mechanically from his lips, and for a few moments he remained motionless, closely watching the miner, as though in doubt what course to pursue. But then, like one struck with a sudden recollection, he sprang forward and holding Pike firmly, poured a portion of whisky down his throat. The strong liquor acted as a restorative, or else the paroxysm had exhausted itself, for in a few moments "Lengthy" was sitting up and gazing around with a dazed look upon his haggard features.

"Thar—you're lookin' hearty oncet more," cried Old Business, in his usual tone of careless ease. "Blamed ef you didn't skeer me, though, fer a bit—thought you was gwine up the flume sure enough!"

"I didn't—didn't talk foolish, did I?"

"A little—you peared to think that the boy hed got rubbed out—that's all," was the quiet reply.

"I didn't know—sometimes critters that way talk a heap o' nonsense, which nobody'd orter pay 'tention to," and there was a wistful look in the hollow eyes, as though Pike longed yet feared to confide in his comrade.

"You're gwine to be sick, old man, ef you don't take keer. Mebbe you'd better hunt out a hole whar you kin take it easy while I finish up this little job—"

"No—I loved Mark like a son, and I'll not desert him now. If he is—is dead, then I'll avenge him—I'll spend the rest of my life—"

"Which won't last more'n three shakes, ef you don't mind," sharply interrupted Old Business, as his hand closed firmly upon Pike's arm. Keep cool—you git another touch o' that sickness, an' I'll hev a funeral on my hands jest when I hain't got time to 'tend to it. Look here: you want to help the lad, ef he's tuck captive, or to avenge him, s'posin' the wust has come to pass. Good enough! So do I. But you'll lose the fun ef you don't keep cool. You can't stand two o' them fits in one day—the next one'll kill you deader'n a tumble-bug under a cartwheel, you hear me! That's why I say—keep cool."

"I know—you are right. But see—we are losing time. Come—let us go!"

"All right—go whar? Ef you want to be boss, jest light out; I'll foller."

"After Mark—to free him, or avenge him! Surely you are not going to hang back now—you, who called him your friend?" impatiently cried Pike.

"Easy, pard—you'll live the longer fer it," was the quiet reply. "I don't reckon you know me pritty well yet, when you talk o' my backin' out. That ain't my name—not much. I never quit a trail until I've seen both ends of it. I struck out 'long a blind trail, fifteen years ago, an' I'm on it yit. I struck another five years ago, an' one three years sence, an' hyar I be, still on the trail, nor will I leave 'em until I bag my game or kick the bucket myself. That's the kind o' hair-pin I am!"

"I didn't mean no 'fense—but you don't know how bad this business hes cut me up," said Pike, huskily.

"I feel it, too, more'n you give me credit fer p'raps. But et that pass. We've lost time enough; now fer business. You jest squat down an' take it easy, while I read the sign 'round here. It's in jest sech jobs that a feller saves time in the eend by makin' haste slowly."

Pike obeyed, partly because he could think of nothing better, though so impatient at what he fancied was a criminal delay, but more because he was far too weak to resist the will of his comrade. The severe fit had shaken him terribly.

"It's easy 'nough to read this lot o' sign, anyhow," said Old Business as much to himself as for the benefit of Pike. "The boy hedn't patience 'nough ter to be a good trailer. He lost sight o' them he was shadowin', an' was afeard they'd give him the slip. 'Stead o' that he run up so close that they hearn an' lay fer him. He stood here when they opened on 'im—thar's whar his heel scratched the rock as he lepped back. They was thar—the withered leaf yender was made so by the burnin' powder. They must 'a' shot more'n oncet, fer thar is whar one o' thar bullets blazed that tree. No—the lad wasn't killed outright—at least at fust. He burned powder afore he went under. 'Twas his bullet scarred the bush over yender. That's plain enough. The shot was fired from here, jest whar he stood. You kin see whar it glanced from the bush an' spattered the rock, yender."

In these and similar words did Old Business, as he fully quartered the ground, explain the sign that keen eye. Pike listened with painful eagerness, patiently at what he deemed a useless delay.

Bending low, almost prostrated, Old Business crept slowly along the defile, his keen eyes overlooking nothing, reading a significant story in signs that would have escaped another's eye altogether.

"What is it—not his—his body?" faltered Pike, as a low whistle broke from the trailer's lips.

"Sca'cely—not much! It's them stubs," and Old Business pointed to where several stout bushes had been cut, evidently within the past few hours. "You kin read what *they* say?"

"No—I'm too stupid to-day. You mustn't expect anything from me—my wits are wool-gathering."

"Lucky I'm in good trim, then. Well, them bresh was used to ferry the boy—either alive or dead—off on. All we've got to do now is to find out whar they tuck him, an' that's by follerin' the trail. You keep behind me, an' use your eyes well as ye kin. 'Twouldn't be healthy fer us to run into comp'ny in these parts, I don't reckon."

Old Business followed the trail at a steady pace, dropping occasional remarks as he progressed. In crossing a narrow patch of moist ground, he paused to measure the different footprints, but found nothing in his little bundle of thongs to match. At several points along the trail he indicated where the litter had rested for a few moments, in each case marked with blood.

Through the defile, out into a wide valley, where the trail was still more difficult to follow. Yet, with the unerring certainty of a bloodhound, the hunter was never once at fault, seemingly guided by more than human powers.

Along the valley for a couple of miles, then to the right through a defile with almost perpendicular walls. The country was even more diversified now than at first. The hills arose, rocky and forbidding, covered with a dark growth of cedar and stunted pines. Canons and ravines yawned upon every side.

And then—Old Business paused with a grunt of disgust. The trail, until now quite plain and distinct, was no longer to be seen, even by his sharp eyes. It ended all at once, a few yards from the base of a precipitous hill. The ground was hard and rocky, yet it seemed impossible for a human being to have left the spot without leaving some signs to indicate how.

"It's an ugly spot," muttered Pike, with a stealthy glance around them. "A superstitious man—"

"Mout s'pect to meet the devil here—jest so; but the devils in these parts are all human, I reckon. You can't faze me—ha! To kiver—quick!"

A long, sharp whistle rung out upon the still noon air, awaking the echoes among the hills with marvelous distinctness. To the startled trail-hunters, it sounded from almost directly beside them, and with weapons ready for use, they sprang back to the nearest cover, a clump of cedars.

Again the signal sounded, and this time it was promptly answered, from some little distance. Their first and most natural fears set at rest, the comrades interchanged glances. The same thought had occurred to them both. Perhaps these persons signaling each other were the ones connected with the disappearance of Mark Austin. If so—

"Look yender!" hissed Old Business, as the figure of a man appeared upon the level ground beyond, and seated himself upon a bowlder. "By—I it's that pesky varmint, Eli Brand!"

"Thar's another—a Greaser, from his looks," whispered Pike, as a lithe, dark-featured man came shambling down the opposite slope.

"Is this the way you keep guard?" angrily cried Eli Brand, as the other neared him. "I've been whistling here this last half-hour—"

What the Mexican replied was lost to our friends, as nearly one hundred yards separated them from Brand and his comrade. Leaning against the rock, they conversed eagerly, as it seemed.

"I cain't stan' this!" muttered Old Business, laying aside his rifle and tightening his belt. "I must hear what they're sayin'. Mebbe it's somethin' 'bout Mark. You keep ready, an' ef they smell me out too soon, jest plug the Greaser; I'll 'tend to Brand."

Prostrating himself, Old Business glided across to where a clump of bushes would conceal him from the two men, then stealthily advanced. But he was too late. The conference, whatever its subject might be, was over, and Brand abruptly turned and left the spot. Old Business gritted his teeth with rage, but there was no help for it.

The Mexican was still standing beside the bowlder, absorbed in rolling up a cigarette. A bold resolve crossed the hunter's mind. If Eli Brand—ha! he was rapidly disappearing down the defile.

But just then the Mexican succeeded in igniting his cigar. His back was toward Old Business, twenty yards away. If Brand was only out of sight!

Then, desperate, Old Business arose and leaped forward with wondrous lightness, his sinewy fingers closing round the astounded Mexican's throat before he could give the alarm. A brief struggle—then the two men fell heavily to the ground, and a bright blade flashed before the eyes of the terrified captive.

CHAPTER XXI.

A FORCED CONFIDENCE.

"OPEN your mouth wide enough to let out a pig's whisper, an' I'll chaw ye up like a ripe pawpaw!" gritted Old Business, as he pressed the point of his knife against the Mexican's jugular until the bright blood trickled down in a little rill. "You give one yelp, an' off ye go to glory by express—you hear me?"

There appeared to be but little danger of the man's crying out, loud enough to attract the attention of Eli Brand, who was just disappearing from view among the crags. Though a stout enough man to all appearance, the Mexican was handled by Old Business like a very babe. Even in the few seconds that those bony fingers had closed around his throat, the wretch turned black in the face, his eyes protruding and bloodshot, his tongue lolling far from his distended jaws.

"You mean to kill him?" muttered Pike, who, now that Eli Brand had vanished, came forward. "Ef you don't wouldn't it be jest as well that you let up a bit on that squeezin' machine o' yourn?"

"Good enough! pard—I don't want to kill the varmint just yet, but ye see, I was so bad skeered I didn't rightly know what I was doin' of. But thar—we've ketched our fish; the next thing's to git away with him."

"I don't see what you want with him—a dirty, buggy, no-count Greaser! Ef 'twas that Eli Brand—"

"It'd be so much the better—yes. But this draw's better'n nothin'. You've 'larnt somethin', but you haven't got past your a-b-ab's yit. Make haste—cut off some of this fellow's duds—never mind whether it's clean or not; the stronger it is the better it'll gag 'im."

Though his tongue wagged freely, Old Business was not idle. Pulling down the gasping wretch's chin, he crammed a handful of greasy cloth into his mouth, keeping the gag in place by binding a stout strip around his head. Another strip secured his hands firmly behind his back. His throat freed, this rude usage seemed to revive the captive, but his struggles were quickly quieted by a significant motion of Old Business.

"Ef you ain't pertickler 'bout keepin' the roof on your skull, jest keep a-doin' that. You kin kick your way to glory in jest three shakes ef you like. Now, boss, just pitch your jinney!"

The cold muzzle of the trailer's revolver was pressed against the captive's temple, and there was a wicked light in the old man's eyes that forbade the idea of his jesting. A grim smile parted his lips as the Mexican turned a sickly pale, and quieted his limbs, all except a convulsive trembling.

"Thar's right—you kin take a hint, I see. Now jest one word more. You've got to go 'long o' us, fer a little ways. It'll be easier fer all of us, ef you walk like a white man. Ye see, I don't think it overly safe, in these parts—the air ain't healthy for our constitution. Jest so, boss," and Old Business chuckled grimly as he read aright the quick glitter in the captive's eye. "You're a smart cuss, an' nobody's fool, so I'll speak plain with ye. You don't know it, mebbe, but you're a 'tickler friend o' ours; so much so that I raally b'lieve I'd kill ye afore givin' ye up. It's quite like you've got 'quaintances in these parts. Then, ef you like livin', jest pray your level best that they mayn't take it into thar fool heads to call on ye while you're in our comp'ny. We'd give ye up, in course, 'cause we're polite—the politest galoots you ever see! But I don't reckon you'd ever know what they wanted o' ye unless they could talk spirit talk. You understand?"

The captive *did* understand; that was quite evident. He saw that the trailer, though so loquacious, was speaking in sober, deadly earnest. And now, instead of hoping that some of his friends might put in an appearance, he prayed with all his soul that nothing of the kind might occur.

"Give him a lift, old man," said the trailer, to Pike, who had stood impatiently by. "Walk him off up the holler a mile or so. I don't think we're in safe quarters here. I'll keep a' eye out fer breakers. You just 'tend to him. Ef he tries to double or cut up any didoes, sock it to 'im, an' make sure work."

Pike walked beside the Mexican, with ready pistol. Old Business kept a few paces in the rear, his keen glance roving in every direction. There was a stern, exultant light in his expression not all produced by the capture of his prisoner, though in that he considered a strong point had been made. It was as though he had made some important discovery—had gained a prize long and wearily watched for.

"Thar'll do, I reckon," said Old Business, when considerably over a mile had been traversed. "Turn in here; it's a nice, quiet spot fer our little 'musement."

Diverging from the valley, the trio passed into a narrow, high-walled "pocket" or *cul-de-sac*, the existence of which could hardly be suspected from the outside, so completely was the entrance masked with vine-wreathed shrubs. Within, close to the towering gray rocks, was a small patch of open ground covered with a soft carpet of rich, thick grass. Upon this Pike seated his captive, with more rapidity than grace or ceremony, simply knocking his feet from beneath him. This accomplished to his satisfaction, he turned and spoke to Old Business for the first time since the capture.

"I don't like to 'pear 'quisitive, pard—you're runnin' this machine, an' I'm only a deck hand, which is good enough an' proper, fur as it goes. But—ain't we wasted 'most time enough over this brute? You know, Mark—"

"I knowed it—I've seed it in your eyes this last half-hour," chuckled Old Business. "You're a good man, Lengthy. You know how to 'bey orders chuck up to the handle. But

you hain't got the 'ventive fackilty which makes a man a slap-up gen'us like—waal, I don't reckon I'll mention any names—a man kin be smart an' modest both. Le' me see—whar was I? oh—a slap-up gen'us which kin—"

The trailer's speech was abruptly cut short. A sound came from without—a heavy footfall. With a significant motion toward the captive, Old Business glided toward the mouth of the pocket, passing through the dense shrubbery with scarcely more noise than would have followed the passage of a bodiless shadow. Pike crouched beside his captive, a keen knife-point pressed against his throat, while holding a revolver in readiness for use.

A few moments of breathless suspense—an age of agony to the captive—and then Old Business reappeared, supreme disgust deeply imprinted upon his rugged features. Leaning against the rock, dashing his ragged hat to the ground, the old trailer went through a series of complicated gesticulations, his features working wildly, his lips moving like those of an orator thoroughly warmed to his work.

Pike stared in open-mouthed astonishment, not unmixed with alarm. For the moment he half-believed his partner had gone crazy.

"Thar—I feel better now!" gasped Old Business, wiping his heated brow.

"What on airth was ye doin', anyhow?"

"Cussin'—that's all. I knowed words wouldn't do justice to the subjec', so I jest went through the motions—feel a heap better, too," chuckled Old Business.

"I thought ye'd gone crazy—nur I ain't sure—"

"Wasn't it enough? Didn't we git skeered out o' ten y'ars growth, thinkin' the hull raft o' them or'nary galoots had corraled us? Didn't I snake out thar, a-tremblin' in my boots like I hed the buck-ager, *bad*? An' didn't I see—jist think of it, sweet Corneille! Nothin' but a durned, or'nary, lap-eared, stump-tailed, three-legged jassack! Wouldn't that make a dead preacher curse blue, red, an' yaller? Somebody kick me—do! I'm too durned smart to live—I be!"

Pike smiled, but 'twas only for a moment. He could not rest easy for thinking of poor Mark. Old Business read his expression aright, and changed instantly into the stern man of business. Squatting beside the captive, he spoke as follows, in remarkably pure Spanish, that the man might have no excuse for not comprehending him.

"Friend, you see this knife? Well, if you raise your voice louder than mine while speaking to you, I'll have to slit your throat. Now I free your mouth, because I want you to answer my questions. Mind, I don't intend to ask you the same question twice. If you refuse to answer, or attempt to deceive me, I shall kill you, that instant. Now—what did that man—Eli Brand—bid you do? Be careful; I heard enough of your conversation to tell whether you speak the truth."

The man, his voice trembling with fear, replied, but so incoherently that the substance alone need be given here. He had been ordered to hasten at once to Windy Gap, there to find Juan Cabrera; to bid him, from the chief, send word to all of their friends, far and wide, to hasten to the rendezvous. Above all he was to keep a close watch for an old man who was known as Old Business, for whose head fifty ounces would be paid.

"Good—so far. Now for this chief of yours—this Vincente Barada. He is an old friend of mine. I am the man who broke up the band at Wild-cat. I remember you, though you have forgotten me. Tell me—where is this rendezvous? the signs, passwords, and all?"

The captive remained silent, a dogged, sullen light in his eyes. Old Business pressed the knife closer until its point was stained with blood; but the Mexican never flinched. The trailer smiled grimly.

"One. Now tell me; two of my friends were taken last night, by Barada's band—a lady and a gentleman. Where are they kept?"

"I don't know—if I did, 'twould be the same. You will learn nothin' more from me—though I had a thousand lives and you were to torture me to death as often," quietly replied the outlaw.

"You are a brave man, friend; what a pity you are not half as sensible! It hurts me to insist, but unfortunately I have no choice. Pike, old man," and he resumed his usual manner of speech. "You take an' gag this cuss. He *must* tell us, ef I hev to tortur' him."

Helplessly bound and gagged, the captive writhed with agony, as the trailer, cold and stern as death, slowly circled his knife around the man's skull, then jerked up the loosened scalp for several inches. It was more than human nature could endure, and the captive *looked* his willingness to confess. Instantly the gag was removed.

He said that two captives had been taken; that they were confined somewhere among the hills. More than that he could not say. Until yesterday, he had never been in the neighborhood—nor had he been allowed to enter the retreat. He had heard of the capture, but had seen neither of the young people.

"I thank you, friend," said the trailer, when convinced that nothing more could be learned. "I will prove my gratitude. You must die, but I will give you a chance for life. If you can kill me, you may go free—I pledge my honor to that. Do your best—I am no child."

Greatly to Pike's astonishment, Old Business set the captive free, and gave him the miner's knife. It was to be a duel to the death. The Mexican crouched low down, then bounded forward like a panther. The blades met—struck fire in showers. Then—with a double feint and stroke so

rapid that the eye could not follow the weapon, Old Business buried his knife to the hilt in the Mexican's breast. Without a groan he fell back, dead.

CHAPTER XXII.

A SCORNED WOMAN'S REVENGE.

WHETHER the period covered by his unconsciousness was to be estimated by minutes, hours or days, Mark Austin had not the slightest idea, when he opened his eyes and stared around him with the dazed, bewildered look so natural under the circumstances. Nor was his wonder at all appeased by his surroundings.

He was lying upon a soft couch, which yielded to his every motion as though composed of eiderdown instead of softly tanned furs. A subdued light—more like that of the full moon than of mortal contrivance—rendered the surrounding objects indistinctly visible.

He seemed to be in a high, vaulted chamber, the walls of which were hung with robes of fur, curtains of silk, and other material. This much he took in at a single glance, then a sharp cry of surprise broke from his lips, and he started half-erect, as a soft voice spoke his name, and a dazzlingly beautiful face appeared close beside his couch.

"You are not afraid of me?" continued the voice. "Ah, you remember how we parted—I hoped you would have forgotten. I was wrong—I was half crazy, then, I believe; at any rate I am sorry for my passionate words, and I beg you will forget and forgive."

Mark could scarce believe his eyes; and yet there could be no mistake. There could not be two such faces, such forms. It was, indeed, Isabella Keyes, the sister of Pacific Pete. Yet how—She read his wonder in his eyes, and with a bright smile lightly placed one finger-tip upon his lips.

"Wait—I know what you would ask, but you are too weak for much talk. Be satisfied that you are among friends—friends who would *die* before letting harm come to you. You believe me?"

She looked wondrously beautiful as she knelt beside his couch of furs, beneath the soft light of the perfumed lamp. Her dress was a marvel of richness and beauty, a mass of rare silk and foamy lace, thickly sprinkled with brilliants. The rich, heavy mass of hair hung below her waist, confined only by a coronet of precious stones, set in dull, lusterless gold. The magnificent, half-veiled bust rising and falling beneath a necklace of diamonds—jewels in her ears, everywhere, sparkling and glowing in the lamplight until the enchantress seemed all fire, all passion—yet with a dreamy, voluptuous glamour over all that few men could have resisted—few men but would have bartered their souls for, and, losing all else, have deemed themselves still the winner.

"Come, you should not be so revengeful," softly added Isabella, drawing still nearer, until her warm breath fanned the young miner's cheek. "Say that you have forgiven my foolish threats—that we are good friends once more."

"They were forgotten as soon as spoken, lady," replied Mark, in a cold tone. "But tell me, what is this place? I remember being attacked and shot or knocked senseless; all after that is like a dream, until I awoke here. What am I to think—am I a prisoner?"

"Alas! yes," sighed Isabella, dropping her eyes. "You have made many enemies, though you may have done so unwittingly; enemies who scruple at nothing. Only for my pleading you would have been killed; but I pledged my word—"

"It was kind, but foolish. I make no compact with villains who make war on women—who wrong those miles above them in everything pure and holy. Surely you have no sympathy with such vagabonds? Then tell me, what have they done with *her*?"

"Who do you mean?" asked Isabella, drawing back.

"Edna—Miss Brand. I saw them and her—it was while following the scoundrels in hopes of aiding her that I was taken prisoner."

"You feel a deep interest in this—person?"

"An interest! I love her better than my own soul!" impulsively cried Mark, his eyes aglow.

"And you say this to me—to me, after all that has passed between us! Fool! fool! will you always be blind—don't you see that you are driving me to ruin and wretchedness for us both? I have fought until I can struggle no longer. Have mercy on me—have mercy on us all—see, I ask it on my knees!"

"I don't understand you," muttered Mark, uneasily.

"Will not, you mean?" cried Isabella, passionately. "Very well; we will fence without the buttons, then. Now, listen to me—hear me through without interrupting."

"You remember what passed between us at Windy Gap. I was a fool—admitted. Yet what I said there I repeat now. I love you!—my God! how I love you! In your arms, with your lips upon mine—as they were once!—I could die without a pang. No, not that; I could not die and leave you, if you loved me. But I could stab you to the heart, and then die upon your bosom, kissing you and telling my love with my last breath. Now can you understand me when I say that I love you? Ah, how weak and feeble are words when one wishes to express passion such as mine!"

Mark ventured no reply. He knew not what to say, and, remembering what a frightful fit of rage his words at their

last meeting had caused her, did not care about repeating the experiment.

"You don't answer me—I know what that means. You prefer this doll-faced girl to me; you would rather be her slave than my master. Bah! to think that I should be such a weak, silly fool as to think twice of a man like that—a *man*, did I say? No, a boy; a milk and water nonentity. And yet—I can't help it—I love you, Mark, I love you!"

"Then why am I treated like this?" cried Austin, impulsively, his face flushed. "Though my love was twice as strong for you as that which you profess to feel for me, I'd die ten times over rather than acknowledge it while kept a prisoner. There—I know what you would say: that I am unbound, that I have no guards—in sight. Yet I know that I am a captive, and in whose hands, too!"

"Sh!" and Isabella touched her lips as she glanced quickly around, as though fearful of being overheard. "That speech would cost your life, were it overheard. Keep a guard upon your tongue, I pray you. And now—you are a captive; that I admit. But I can set you free—will, on conditions. Wait, hear me out; then you can accept or reject."

"First to prove that I do not overrate your danger. You are in the secret rendezvous of the band of—well, call them 'road agents,' that name is significant, and yet it is not too grating. This band is under the command of Vincente Barada. You have met him under a different cloak—as the gambler and sport, Pacific Pete. Wait—I am telling you the truth; my brother is indeed the celebrated outlaw, whose name is only second to that of the great, the daring, matchless Joaquin Murieta."

Mark listened in mute amazement, scarcely able to believe his ears. Yet there was an accent of truth in the woman's voice that carried conviction with it.

"I tell you this because you will never repeat it. If you ever see the light of day again, 'twill be as an ally of ours. I have been candid with you, so you can see that I promise nothing beyond my power—that I threaten no more than I can perform. Promise me that you will forget this girl; that you will never seek to meet her, never speak to her, even if you should chance to meet her. Promise to accept my love—I don't ask you to love me in return, at first; it will come in time. I will make you love me, if I only have the chance. See, I am rich. I can load you down with diamonds and precious stones. I can give you gold by the mule-load. All this I will give you—together we will go far away, leaving the past behind us, thinking only of the present, living only for each other; we will be happy as the day is long!"

"A charming picture, truly," said Mark with a half sneer. "Of course, it has two sides; now for the other."

"It has—a black one," and there was a great change in the passionate pleader of a moment since; her face was white, her eyes cold and hard, her voice sharp and ringing. "If you refuse, listen. I will first strike at your heart. Edna Brand is here, in my power. One of the band—a handsome, reckless devil, whose soul is stained with every sin in the decalogue—has taken a fancy to her. If you refuse, I will give her over to him. Bah!" she cried, scornfully, as Mark sprung up with an angry cry, "you think to threaten me? Strike—I am only a woman, but I am not a woman such as you are!"

Mark sunk back upon the couch, with a stifled curse. Isabella smiled, like a beautiful demon, then continued:

"That will be her fate—imagine how delightful! We will have a glorious revel over the affair—a fit celebration for the joyous mating. But there—you do not seem to appreciate my efforts to amuse you, so I will leave the rest to your imagination."

"This is her part in the drama; now for yours. I have thought it all carefully over. Come with me; please accept my arm; no? Well, have your own way. I can bear even that mortification. Thanks to your lessons, I am growing quite thick-skinned," and she laughed, a low, mocking peal, that caused Mark to shudder with a vague dread, despite his strong nerves.

Isabella drew aside one of the silk curtains, revealing a low, narrow aperture in the rock wall. Passing through, Mark found himself in a small, dimly-lighted apartment or cell, with walls of solid rock, as it seemed.

The woman took down the rude lamp from its niche in the wall, and stooping, motioned Mark to her side.

"Look down," she said, holding the light so as to reveal a black pit before them. "Now listen."

She held a stone over the abyss, then dropped it. Nearly a minute passed without any sound of its touching bottom. Isabella smiled coldly, as she spoke:

"A man would have time to think over all his evil deeds, before reaching bottom, don't you think so? Now, I ask you once more, and for the last time: do you accept or refuse my proposal? Remember, not only your own life depends upon your answer, but that of Edna Brand as well. Choose between me—"

"There is no choice," coldly interrupted Mark. "I would sooner hug a rattlesnake to my bosom, than you."

"Then die—fool that you are!" shrieked the infuriated woman, as she dropped the lamp and sprung against the young miner, with a force that seemed superhuman.

A brief struggle; then the ground seemed to give way beneath him. A shrill, piercing cry—then all was still.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"MARCO OF THE SCAR."

THE flickering lights burned dimly, casting weird, dancing shadows over the whole scene.

A large, irregularly-shaped chamber, its sides of rock, here and there reflecting back the red torchlight with a dull glitter, amid the dazzling brilliant points of quartz, speaking of gold in a tongue that is seldom mistaken. The dome-shaped roof is high, smoke-stained and gloomy. Here and there along the walls are darker spots, marking the entrance to long, intricate passages winding into the bowels of that honey-combed mountain, or else opening upon some smaller chamber.

The red light shines down upon a boisterous and not unpicturesque crowd. Men from nearly every nation under the sun, from the Brazilian negro to the fair-haired German, the massive-limbed Norseman to the dapper little Frenchman, with all the intermediate links—a band with only one thing in common; the fraternity of crime.

A lithe, graceful figure paused at the mouth of one of the passages, and gazed around upon the little groups of men as they caroused, played cards or smoked in lazy content. A ray of red light fell athwart his face, revealing the broad, white forehead, the lustrous eyes, the handsome features of the man who called himself Pacific Pete—now seen in his true colors, the celebrated outlaw chief, Vincente Barada, whose name was second only in the annals of California to that of the notorious JOAQUIN.

A low, peculiar whistle sounded from without. Like magic the scene changed. The men sprung erect, each hand grasping a weapon. The chief adroitly clasped a black mask over his face, then advanced toward the entrance.

"A stranger, master," uttered a tall man, as he humbly uncovered before the outlaw leader. "He flung down his arms, and said that he was seeking you, in hopes of employment. As he seemed to know all about the retreat, we thought it best to bring him in for you to decide."

"Right enough, Wister. Bring him here, and watch me close. If I make the old signal—you remember it? If I move my hand thus, you know what I expect."

Wister bowed low in silence, then glided away, returning the next moment with the stranger, upon whom all eyes were now riveted with curiosity.

They saw a tall, erect figure, a model of symmetry, dressed in a rich and picturesque suit of velvet and broadcloth—the dress of a wealthy ranchero. As he stood before the masked outlaw the stranger removed his sombrero, and bowed low, then drew himself erect and cast a swift glance around upon the motley crowd.

His hair, long and glossy, hung over his shoulders in slightly curling locks. A drooping mustache concealed his mouth. His features seemed regular, and would have been deemed handsome, only for the long, purple scar that crossed his face from left temple to right cheek.

"You wished to see me, senor?" softly demanded Pacific Pete.

"If you are Vincente Barada—yes. I am seeking a man to serve under. Since the death of the great Joaquin—Mother of Sorrows receive his soul! Since he, my captain, was murdered, there is only one man left whom I call master," replied the stranger, in a deep, not unpleasant voice.

"Do you know what and who this Barada is?"

"I know that he is a man—true to the core. That is enough for me. I, too, am a man. Since '42 I have been on the road; since '50 a member of Joaquin's band. There are nine different prices set upon my head. Since that black day—may lightning wither the hand that laid low the bravest, the truest heart that ever throbbed against wrong and injustice! Since that day I have played a lone hand. I have drank deep of vengeance, but now—I need rest, and help. I sought you out—a friend at Wild-cat gave me the clue. I came here—I offer you my services. If you accept them, good; you will never regret doing so."

"What is your name? I must have heard of it, since you have played such a bold part."

"You see this?" and the man laughed harshly as he touched the livid scar. "I received that on the day Joaquin died. They call me Marco of the Scar, now. Before that, they called me Firebrand."

"Report said that Firebrand died with Joaquin."

"From this touch it came. I lay two days and nights like a dead man. A 'John' found that I was alive. He dragged me away, nursed and brought me around, in time. I didn't care about leaving my secret behind me, so—well, 'John' was only a piece of broken China, when I took to the road once more."

This cool confession seemed to strike the outlaws favorably, and a little murmur of admiration ran round the circle, until quelled by a gesture from Pacific Pete.

"Your story is a straight one; still, my band is very select. None are admitted but those who can prove themselves worthy in every respect. Now, what can you do?"

"Leaving my chief out of the question, I can do anything that any man can—and just a little better than the best," was the modest reply. "But words are not proof. You know your men, and what they are capable of doing. Select them for their skill in any particular line, and if I do not at least equal each and every one, I will forfeit my head. 'Twill bring you at least five hundred ounces at Frisco."

"Indeed! If you are as expert in everything else as you are with your tongue, Sir Marco, I fear we will all have to bow down and worship you as a demi-god," sneered Pacific

Pete. "Still, you shall have your way. In *everything*, you said?"

"Yes, my captain," was the quiet reply.

"We'll adjourn to the open air, then. Lamplight is not just the thing for neat work."

Followed by the eager crowd, which, however, was kept in wonderful subjection by the mere presence of their master and chief, they passed out upon the broad, level ledge of rock that extended along the side of the mountain. Without a word Pacific Pete held out his hand and Wister placed in his grasp a heavy revolver. Glancing around for a mark, the outlaw chief leveled his weapon and rapidly emptied the six chambers at a small tree that grew little less than a hundred yards distant. The party could distinguish the little patch of shattered bark that marked the first shot, then another and another, until the six bullets were planted so closely together that the crown of a hat might have covered all.

"A man would stand but little show with you for an antagonist, captain," said Marco, quietly. "Unfortunately you have selected my best card—if it was worth while being proud of anything in this world, I would feel proud of my marksmanship. Friend," he added, turning to Wister, "will you loan me the mate of that weapon? Mine has been confiscated, I guess. Thanks. Now, captain—and you, gentlemen; you see the first limb of that tree? Watch the first bend in it. That elbow is two inches thick—I'll cut it through."

Firing rapidly, yet with evident care, the candidate actually succeeded in accomplishing the feat, incredible as it may seem to those who have not been *raised* with a firearm in their hands. As the limb slowly bent over and then fell, completely severed, a wild yell of admiration went up from the motley crowd. Of them all, Pacific Pete alone seemed displeased.

"I acknowledge my defeat, for once. But your skill in this respect only makes me more curious to see you in other feats. You understand knife-play?"

"I was Joaquin's pupil, and in a fair match I made Three-fingered Jack—Manuel Garcia, you know—acknowledge himself defeated."

"Good! we will have some sport, then. 'Twill look better by lamplight; come," and Pacific Pete re-entered the cavern, followed by the others.

At a signal from his chief, a wiry, active-looking half-breed threw aside his outer garments, and stood ready for the struggle, knife in hand. Marco was more methodic, quietly laying aside his clothes as he said:

"The conditions, master? Is it to be an inch or the whole blade?"

"Will an inch of steel satisfy *you*?" and as the chief replied, his lips curled with a disagreeable sneer.

"Possibly—were I to receive it instead of to give. I was speaking of *him*, not of myself. I didn't know but you considered him too valuable a man to lose so easily."

"Say the *whole blade*, master," exclaimed the outlaw, his dark eyes glowing with rage at the cool manner of Marco.

"I'm agreeable, provided you all hold me free from malice in killing the boy," said the scarred brigand, with a sneer.

"To the hilt, then!" cried the chief. "Show yourself worthy of my choice, Chico!"

"I'll measure the depth of his heart in two minutes, master!" was the quiet reply, as the half-breed sprung forward.

But Marco never flinched, never gave one inch before his furious attack. Like a shield of glittering steel, his knife flashed here and there, warding off cuts and thrusts with seeming ease, turning aside the thirsty blade as though by magic. Furious at being repeatedly baffled, Chico grew more and more reckless, exposing his own life repeatedly in his efforts to beat down or slip through his antagonist's guard, until at length Pacific Pete uttered a cry of impatient warning.

As though this was a signal, Marco assumed the offensive, and forced Chico slowly back until he was cornered against the wall. Then, with a couple of feints, so swift that the eye could not follow them, Marco plunged his knife to the very hilt in the half-breed's neck, the point ranging down and fairly piercing his heart.

"Only for his hot temper, the boy would have been a fair knife-player," said Marco, coolly, as he stepped back and quietly folded his arms.

"Dead—he never knew what hurt him!" muttered Wister, as he bent over and examined the body.

"You won fair enough, yet I'd almost as soon have received that blow myself," said the outlaw leader, in a cold, metallic tone. "My best scout and spy—well, such is life! How is it, fellows—are we to acknowledge Senor Marco as our master?"

"Collar-and-elbow" said he don't mind takin' a turn at 'im," cried out one of the men, and a heavy yet well-built man stepped forward.

"Anything to please the children," laughed the man with the scar. "Play light, old man—you've got my weak point now. I am better with the fists than at this work."

"I'm the bye fer yez at that game, too, honey," grinned the Celt, as they carefully secured their grips.

The struggle was more even this time, yet it was evident to all that "Collar-and-elbow" had found his match, if not superior. Then the Celt gave a little cry of triumph. He had succeeded in getting in his favorite "lock" and considered a victory assured. But Marco suddenly broke the lock, bowed his head, and with an effort that caused every muscle to crack, lifted his antagonist up and flung him heavily over

his head. The fall was a square one, both shoulders touching the ground.

"Who comes next?" cried Marco, flushed, yet breathing evenly despite the long and trying struggle. "I've got my hand in, and don't care what you try me at. Anything—anything! What! not one man in all this crowd with confidence enough in himself to give me a trial?"

"The devil himself wouldn't tackle you after seeing you perform, comrade," cried Wister, bluntly, as he grasped the scarred man's hand and wrung it warmly.

"You have done enough for one day, Senor Marco," said the chief, though coldly. "You are a worthy addition to our band, and we will swear you in to-night. If you accept the conditions, well and good; you will never regret doing so. If not—"

"Well—if not?" asked Marco, as the chief paused.

"There is no alternative. No man can enter here without becoming one of us, or—dying. You understand?"

"Is this a *threat*, Senor Barada?"

"No—a caution. Wister, a word with you," and he drew his follower aside, yet speaking in a tone distinctly audible to the new recruit. "Double the guards—keep a close lookout. Suffer no one to leave the cavern without he can show my pass. There's mischief in the wind!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

ALL FOR LOVE.

In a chamber much smaller and far less comfortably arranged than that in which Mark Austin returned to consciousness, Edna Brand passed the weary hours of her captivity—if captivity it could really be called. As yet she knew nothing of the real reasons for the treatment she had received, and, perhaps, 'twas just as well that she did not. The knowledge would scarce have reassured her.

She had left the hotel in the cool of the afternoon for her ordinary walk. She had been rudely seized by three men, whose faces were all strange to her. They threatened to tie and gag her at the first attempt at resistance or of trying to summon help. In fear of worse, she submitted. The long, weary walk through the night; the brief struggle with the man whom she quickly recognized as Mark Austin; the continued journey, walking before the silent, bleeding figure, borne upon a rude litter; the entrance to this wild retreat; a startling discovery she had made since—*all these reflections* now crowded upon Edna's mind, as she sat despondent upon the rude pallet beneath the dim lamp.

A rustling noise at the entrance of the chamber suddenly aroused her, and with a little cry Edna sprung to her feet. Isabella stood before her, richly dressed, her face flushed, her eyes glittering with strong excitement.

"Sit down," she said, in a clear, metallic tone, widely different from her usual soft, almost languid utterance.

"I promised to visit you again, to tell you why you are here, a captive, as you choose to term it. Well, here I am ready to redeem my pledge, if you still require it."

"If you will—will be so kind," faltered Edna, shrinking back from that burning glance.

"Kind! You will find little kindness in *me*, girl, even when I am at my best. To-day Satan himself might envy me my mood. What I tell you will be the plain truth, unvarnished. If it displeases you, blame yourself."

Edna drew back as Isabella sunk down upon the pallet. Despite her natural courage, the maiden felt ill at ease in the presence of this passionate woman. Yet such was her anxiety to learn all that she replied:

"I do claim your promise. Tell me why I was brought here—what I have done to deserve this treatment."

"What have you done?—rather what have you *not* done? But there—I will not amuse you by getting hot. So—listen, now. First, you are here by your father's connivance."

Edna started, and was about to speak, but a quick, impatient gesture bade her hold her peace.

"When I am through, you can say what you please—until then, listen. I said that your father knew all about your abduction beforehand, and I speak no more than the truth. To do him justice he made some objections but I overruled them. What I say is his law. Why? Well, he is in my power—or that of my brother, which amounts to the same thing. It is just possible that he may never have told you the story—men are so modest! But I told you I was in the mood for plain speech this evening, so listen:

"There was a man named Gospel Dick, who made a fortune in the mines. He was robbed—almost murdered at the same time. Judge Lynch took hold of the affair, and only for me the thief would have suffered. I gave him shelter, though unwittingly, at the time; I learned all afterward. Gospel Dick was not killed, then, and soon recovered his strength, though never his mind. He had only one idea; that of finding his murderer, as he termed it. Whether he had any suspicions of the truth or no, he seemed to have struck the right trail, and the criminal grew uneasy. The devil still stood his friend. One day he found Gospel Dick fighting with a huge bear. He raised his rifle and fired, just as the crazy man drove his knife to the hilt in the brute's heart. Both fell dead—Gospel Dick with a bullet through his brain.

"The murderer fled, little thinking there had been an eye-witness to his crime. That night my brother made him his slave. The murderer was obliged to sign a complete confes-

sion of the deed—of the robbery as well as the murder; he gave my brother the only clue he had to the buried treasure—a chart of the spot where he had hidden the gold stolen from Gospel Dick, when the hot and persistent search made him afraid of its being traced home to him. That man—the murderer of Gospel Dick—was Eli Brand, your father!”

Edna sunk to the floor with a groan of agony. She never doubted the woman's truth—it chimed in too well with the confession of her father that night at the hotel; she knew, too, that Pacific Pete was none other than Vincente Barada, the man whom Brand said could hang him as a murderer.

“I warned you that my talk would not be soft as rose-leaves nor sweet as honey,” laughed Isabella. “However, you know now why your worthy parent lent himself to further our plans—simply because brother threatened to hand him over to the miners—to Mark Austin, the son of the man called Gospel Dick!”

The revengeful woman laughed gleefully as she saw how Edna writhed with agony at these startling words. To think that he—the man whom she loved with all her young heart—should be the son of her father's victim. Oh, it was horrible!

“I see you are interested,” added Isabella, finding an almost fiendish satisfaction in tormenting her victim. “That is well; I have something more to tell you. Doubtless you would like to learn why I—for in this matter brother has acted only as my agent—why I have taken so much trouble to bring you here. I am in a communicative mood this evening, fortunately.

“But first, let me tell you what story was spread about concerning your disappearance. You were said to have been abducted by three men; so far the truth answered. Those three men were Mark Austin, his partner Pike, and an old man—or a young one in disguise, as I strongly suspect—who calls himself Old Business. The alarm was given, the report spread, and Judge Lynch paid their cabin a visit. Never mind what passed there—enough that suspicion will never touch the right party.

“What were my reasons?” Well, I did not intend telling you the whole truth, but there's a devil in me to-night, and you will never have the chance to triumph over me. If I have failed, so will have you.

“You fell in love with Mark Austin—bah! why blush! He is not here to go into ecstasies over your mock-modesty. You fell in love with him, and—I'll be frank—he was just as foolish as you. Curses on the day that first he saw you! Only for that I might have been happy—oh! so happy!”

Isabella now gave evidence of another phase in her wild, impulsive nature. From being hoarse and harsh with rage, her voice grew soft and broken, and bowing her head she wept bitterly. Only for a few moments. Then, proudly raising her head, she tossed back the disheveled hair, dashed the pearly drops from her flushed cheeks, and laughed bitterly in scorn at her own weakness.

“Bah! I was actually growing sentimental—I! But, after all, 'tis as well. That little outburst will save words. You know now that I fell in love with this wonderful miner as well as yourself. You remember last Sabbath? Doubtless you marked it with a white stone in your calendar. Well, that same evening he spent with me, in my room. Ha! that touched you! 'Tis true, though. Could you only have seen us at one moment—when I laid in his arms, heart to heart, his lips glued to mine—would your dreams have been quite so pleasant? I think not.

“And yet—why should I lie to you? No; I will play fair, since you can never take advantage of my confession. 'Twas only for a moment that he yielded. Then I suppose he thought of you. He grew cold and distant. I—like a fool—had lost my head, or all might have been different. I laid myself at his feet. I did not ask so much—only his love, which I could return two thousand fold. I suppose the idea shocked his Puritanic scruples; at any rate, he coldly rejected my love. There! 'tis out at last, and I feel the better for having spoken. Only—you shall never triumph over my disgrace.

“You can easily guess, now, my reasons for abducting you, and accusing him. I wanted you out of the way; wanted to have him in my power. I have succeeded in both. Now for the next move.

“I have sent for a particular friend of yours—one who adores the very ground your pretty foot touches. He will come here to-morrow. Thirty hours from this you will be his bride—”

Edna interrupted her with a sharp cry. Imperiously waving her hand, Isabella commanded silence. Weak, heart-broken, Edna obeyed.

“I mean to be generous. It will be a genuine bridal. Though the gentle bridegroom is a Catholic and you a Protestant, both parties can be satisfied, for we have a priest and a Methodist minister in our band; each of them has consented to perform the ceremony. 'Twill be a pity if, between them, they can not marry you so firmly that all further thought of Mark Austin will be a sin. Then—I have given you enough to think about, for once. Now, I must leave you, to visit Mark. Don't you envy me?” and the woman arose with a bitter laugh.

“Wait—I forgot to mention the name of the happy man who is to call you wife. And you would let me go without one question? What a shy little bird it is! Well—listen. The much-to-be-envied man is—Juan Cabrera.”

“Never!” cried Edna, with a sudden return of her natural spirit. “I'll die first!”

“I believe you would, just to spite me; but that is impossible. You will be watched every moment, from this. Remember—to-morrow night!” and with a loud laugh, Isabella left the chamber.

CHAPTER XXV.

BOON COMPANIONS ALL.

“GENTLEMEN—comrades,” cried Marco of the Scar, in a clear, ringing voice, as he sprung to his feet, a battered tin cup in his hand. “I'll give you a sentiment—up, all of you and drink uncovered. The man who refuses it, calls me his enemy. Drink—to the truest comrade, the boldest heart, the kindest friend and leader, the most dangerous enemy—drink to the prince of free riders, JOAQUIN MURIETA!”

The toast was drunk in silence, with bared heads, and—in more than one case—moistened eyes. The true history of Joaquin Murieta will never be written. To most ears the name means only a ferocious, bloodthirsty outlaw. The terrible wrongs he suffered, and which drove him to the bad; his brother and brother-in-law murdered; himself cruelly flogged; his young wife outraged and murdered—Joaquin robbed and left for dead; all this before he committed a single crime. If he waded knee deep in blood, had he no justification? At heart his comrades believed he had. To them he was a demi-god.

But this momentary emotion soon passed by. The outlaws were in for a night's spree, and this event occurred so rarely that they could not afford to lose much time in regretting the dead and gone. A deputation, headed by Wister, had waited upon Pacific Pete, and requested permission to celebrate the admission of so skillful a comrade as Marco of the Scar, with an old-fashioned drinking bout. The chief consented, after detaching men to act as outside guards.

Gathered in the large chamber, the men began their revels, after Marco of the Scar gave the toast. 'Twas a free and easy scene. No tables, no chairs; a number of robes and skins were flung upon the floor. Upon these the two score men were stretched. A ten-gallon keg of whisky stood in the center, upon this Wister sat, as master of the revels. He it was who turned the faucet and filled the tin, pewter, or horn cups as often as he deemed fit.

The party, considering its rough elements, was wonderfully quiet and decorous. Wister had cautioned them that the chief was in an ill-humor, and would stand little disturbance.

Marco of the Scar was soon the life of the party. He proved himself as brilliant in conversation and repartee as skillful with the knife and pistol. Yarn after yarn did he reel off until he had the field pretty much to himself, the rest contenting themselves with listening, and an occasional comment now and then.

“Gentlemen, this is an anniversary,” said Marco; “come; drink to the past!”

The toast was duly honored, then Marco resumed.

“Yes—an anniversary, and I will tell you of what. If the story be a dry one, all the better, since we are here for drinking. If it prove too tiresome, check me.

“I am a Spaniard by birth and family, though raised in New Orleans. My life had nothing out of the common in it until I was twenty. Then I fell in love—as the phrase runs—with and married a bewitching little morsel from the French quarter. I was green enough, then; I only saw that she had a soft, lustrous eye, ripe red lips, and a figure that was a complete edition of love itself; so I married her, after two days' acquaintance. But if I required no more, my parents did. Of 'blue blood' themselves, they could have forgotten any other sin—but this, never. Actually Nina could not swear that she had ever had a father.

“The old story—angry father—disinherited son; a parting curse by way of blessing, and then we each went our way, for I would not give up my little one. Still I felt the blow bitterly, for, being an only son, I had been petted and made much of, all my life. So, to drown memory, I spent the night at the tables. When day dawned, I found myself the winner of nearly twenty thousand dollars. I tossed it all into Nina's lap. No, she did not run away with it; possibly she had not yet tired of love's young dream.

“That night's success decided me. I set up a gambling-house. Luck favored me; I made gold by thousands; in six months I was the richest man in New Orleans.

“The cards can not run forever in one channel—a change must come, sooner or later. Mine came in this wise. A stranger—one of such remarkable appearance that, interested, I sought to discover who he could be, but in vain; this stranger visited my table regularly every night, remaining just an hour, then disappearing, generally the winner, for he betted with good judgment and steady nerve.

“One morning I went home, but found it cold and deserted. A little note from Nina told me all. She was weary playing the role of dutiful wife. She had eloped with her first love.

“That little scrap of paper changed me wonderfully, gentlemen. I was no longer the soft, confiding fool. I vowed vengeance upon them both; you shall see how well I kept my oath.

“'Twas nearly a week before I could fairly strike their trail. When I did, I found that this 'first love' of Nina's

was none other than my 'unknown.' You wouldn't care for the details; of how I trailed them, day after day, through England, France, then back to America. At last I run the game to earth, near Jalapa, in Mexico. And, there, for the first time, I learned who my man really was: Tiburcio Vasquez—King of the Jarochos, he was called.

"Time, hard drinking, and brooding over the insult cast upon me, had wrought a great change in my personal appearance. This, with a careful disguise, insured me against detection. I soon made the acquaintance of one of the band, and through him asked to be admitted into the company. I offered—just as I did here to-day—to cope with any or all of their best men, at their own game. I was given the chance. I defeated every man who was pitted against me. I was elected a member, unanimously, though the chief seemed to have his doubts—just as our noble captain acted this afternoon—he could give no reasons for crossing the will of his men, and so I became 'one of them.' Again, like now, we all gathered together for a carouse; but here the resemblance stops.

"At midnight I was the only one left sober, among the men. I stole away, and soon found the quarters of the chief—and Nina. I seized and bound him. Nina, recognizing me, lay like one dead with fear, never making a sound. I bound her, as well. Then I told them all: how I had followed them ever since that black day, watching and waiting for the moment to strike. It had come at last.

"I carried them outside the house. I bound them to the two pillars in front. They shrieked aloud, but no one came to their assistance. The men were drunk—drugged in a sleep that would last for hours.

"Well—I applied the torch. Dry as tinder, the little building was in a furious blaze the next moment. Seated before them, I smoked my cigar. I recalled the past. Reminded them of the honor they had stolen from me when I was busy making a fortune for her. Well—I never relented for one moment.

"In half an hour, all was over. That was thirteen years ago. Gentlemen, again—to the past!"

The ball has kept rolling. One by one the outlaws narrated their experience; in all, a catalogue of sins that would have shamed the Newgate calendar. The liquor flowed freely, and the men were fast becoming uproarious, when the outlaw chief appeared and sternly ordered them to give up their drinking.

"You are making noise enough to wake the dead. Then—there will be need of cool heads and steady hands soon—perhaps to-morrow. Remember—I don't speak twice," and he passed on to inspect the sentinels in person.

Marco of the Scar had attached himself to Collar-and-elbow; it seemed as though the tough struggle they had had inspired respect, if not admiration. At any rate, in their cups they swore eternal friendship.

The Irishman insisted upon the new recruit's choosing his couch, and together they reeled toward it, in a dark corner. Once there, after cautioning his comrade, Marco produced a large leather flask of liquor. The bait was tempting—doubly so, since 'twas forbidden, and the comrades were soon busily engaged devouring its contents; at least Collar-and-elbow was. It seemed as though Marco was bent on still further increasing the resemblance between his story and the present.

Collar-and-elbow soon succumbed; a heavy snore told that he was asleep. Marco cautiously gazed around. All was still, save for sundry heavy breathings. The lights burned dim. Everything seemed propitious.

Feeling of his weapons, he noiselessly crawled away in the darkness. He had evidently made good use of his eyes that night, for he seemed never at a loss. Entering one of the dark passages, he glided along it, a bared knife in his hand, the other slipping along the uneven stone wall.

Presently a faint light glimmered before him. Stealthily, noiselessly as an Indian upon the war-trail, he crept along, then paused at the entrance of the small chamber. A faint sound of breathing came to his ears. He crept forward. A woman was lying upon the rude couch of skins. Holding his breath, he glided to her side. One arm covered her face. She moved restlessly, and the hand dropped. Her brow was moist, a look of pain upon her pale features.

"Father—have mercy—spare me!"

Quick as thought Marco leaped back, into the darkness, believing himself discovered. But Edna had only spoken from out a troubled dream.

He retraced his steps, and entered another passage. It also conducted him to a chamber, though unlighted. He listened. All was still. He entered. No sound of breathing: the chamber was vacant. Ha! A faint sound came to his ears, just as he was retreating. He listened: again that sound, like a half-stifled groan.

He followed the sound, cautiously. He stopped as his hand touched a silken curtain. It hung before an opening, as he quickly discovered. Pushing it aside, still all was dark. The groaning, sighing sound came still plainer. He hesitated; a clammy dew moistened his brow. But then, as if drawn on by some invisible hand, he crawled on.

The strange sound no longer guided him. He listened. All was still. Yet he could not retreat. He seemed fascinated—by what, he could not have told. He crawled on.

A faint sound startled him; but it came from his rear. He glanced back. A faint light shone through the silken drapery. Some one had entered the outer chamber.

Believing himself caught, he sprung to his feet, and then—felt himself falling—down—down—

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE WAGES OF SIN.

"Yes, I sent for you. Sit down and fill your glass."

The speaker was Pacific Pete, or, as he may henceforth be termed, Vincente Barada. He addressed Eli Brand, who stood before him, uncovered, sullen respect, not unmixed with fear, written plainly upon his dark countenance.

"Drink—success to all our plans! And now—your attention. Of course you know that I did not request your company through pure love; you wouldn't believe me were I to swear it. We know each other too well to attempt wearing the mask while alone."

"What is it you want of me," sullenly muttered Brand.

"Good! you are in the humor I like best—short and sweet. There will be less difficulty in our coming to terms. But first—you see this bit of paper?"

While speaking the outlaw chief produced a small note-book, and from it extracted a worn and discolored slip of paper, bearing several lines of writing, beneath a rude diagram. This he passed before Eli Brand's eyes laughing softly.

Brand's face flushed hotly, then turned pale as death. A hoarse, inarticulate cry broke from his lips as he snatched desperately at the bit of paper. But it was dextrously withdrawn, and a sharp, significant click recalled his senses, as a black-muzzled revolver almost touched his temple. Again laughing softly, Barada said:

"No, no, dear friend—have patience. You see I have not forgotten with whom I am dealing. Back, I say! down in your chair this instant, or by the devil, our master, I'll see what your brains are made of!"

The abrupt change, the devilish glitter in Barada's eyes, awed Brand into submission, and he sunk back into his chair, pale and trembling, though the devil's-fire still smoldered in his small eyes.

"You must be mad, man, to attempt such a trick with me," sneered Barada. "Only that I have need of you—work for you to do—that act would have been your death. As it was, I could scarcely hold my hand. If you are not anxious to commit suicide, never tempt me again. You understand?"

"What do you want me to do?" sullenly muttered Brand.

"A difficult job; and yet, if you succeed, 'twill be the best rewarded act of your life. But wait. That there may be no chance of a mistake, let's take a retrospective glance. Ah! if black looks would only kill—but they won't, you know. So, take my advice. Smooth down your brow, and take matters philosophically. You'll live the longer for it," and Barada thoughtfully refilled his glass.

"But, as I was saying: the past. You remember the poor devil called Gospel Dick? Ah! I see you do. Good! Well, I have made a discovery concerning him. His name was John R. Austin—the R standing for Richard, whence his being nicknamed Dick. Mark Austin was his son. He had a brother, too—a roving, reckless, rolling-stone. Though probably neither is aware of the other's purpose, both brother and son are here trying to sift the mystery of Austin's disappearance. Whether either of them have a suspicion of the actual truth, I don't know. But if they do strike the right trial, I wouldn't give much for your life. Ah, that touches you; I thought as much.

"Now, listen. This is what I am trying to get at. I hold here the confession of the—the man who murdered Gospel Dick; also, the only clue to the spot where the stolen gold was buried. Little wonder that you could not find the treasure; for I removed it to a safe spot. Easy—don't be a fool, man! I've got the drop on you this time; don't tempt me too far.

"This brother, if I mistake not, is none other than the man you know as Old Business. You can easily sum up your chances were I too pass this confession over to him. Whether I do or not, depends wholly upon you. I, too, have had dealings with this man; never mind what they were; the simple fact that I want him put out of the way is enough. Now you know the price of these bits of papers. You dispose of him, and you are a free man once more. Fail, and you are lost—doubly lost."

"You are sure of this man?" asked Brand, eagerly, his eyes dilating, a strange expression on his weather-beaten features. "He is the—that man's brother?"

"Not sure—but confident. I don't think I can be mistaken," and—strange sight!—Pacific Pete trembled all over, his lips blanched as he cast a nervous glance behind him, as though dreading some vision of the past.

Brand's eyes glittered anew as he noted this; but his voice was even and steady as he added:

"You may think it strange, but now that I know the worst I am much easier in my mind. Come—the day for reserve between us is past. I'll tell you why I am so willing to join you in your plans against the man. You have always supposed Edna to be my own daughter, have you not? But she is not."

Brand was slowly tracing figures in the few drops of liquor that had been spilled upon the table. Mechanically he slowly traced out a name, letter by letter. Like one fascinated, Barada followed his finger with his eyes—a look of unutterable horror deepened on them as the name drew nearer completion. But Brand saw nothing of this. In a dull monotonous tone he spoke on.

"No, she is no relation to me. Years ago I had a bosom friend; I loved him better than life, though he treated me more as a servant than a comrade. I know now that he had many secrets from me, while I believed he was as open and free to me as I was to him. One night he told me a story—

a tale of reckless crime and treachery. Never mind the details; 'twould not interest you. Enough that the avenger was upon his trail. He gave me a bit of paper, and made me swear to carry his child away and use her as my own, in case anything should happen to him.

"He was still talking, when the door opened and a tall man sprung upon him. He gasped a name, then died. It all passed so quiet that I could not interfere. The murderer then turned upon me. I sprung through the window and fled. There was something in that handsome, yet satanic face, that unmanned me.

"I hastened to his house and bore away the child. I—but you are ill?" he hastily added, for the first time noticing the strange demeanor of his captain.

"No, no; go on," hoarsely whispered the outlaw chief.

"That's all. I'm a fool for babbling of my private affairs," and the old dogged look came back to Brand's face. "I only meant to tell you why I feared this old man. I believed him to be this man—he who murdered my friend. But you have set me at ease. I will kill him, at your price. But, to prove your sincerity, give me at least one of those papers."

"You may have this," and Barada was once more his usual self, as he tossed the rude diagram over to Brand. "The confession shall be yours when you bring me plain proof that the man is dead. Now go."

"Give me the order to pass the guards. I feel the need of fresh air. And then I am anxious to get to work."

"I'll go to the entrance with you. Come."

Brand passed out of the cavern, and glided away in the night. The stars told him that he had several hours before day—enough for his work. When once out of sight of the cavern he halted in a deep hollow, and kindled a tiny fire. By its light he carefully examined the diagram, his eyes aglow with cupidity.

Then a glad cry broke from his lips. He had mastered the contents—had succeeded in comprehending the diagram. A strange thrill agitated his frame as he realized that at last the long-lost treasure was his; the blood-stained gold—the wages for which he had committed murder.

Extinguishing the fire, Brand clambered out of the hollow and hastened away from the spot. He was all of a tremble—a strange fire seemed working in his veins. With this man the lust of gold was a second nature. To it he had sacrificed prospects brighter than fall to the lot of most men. Love and friendship had been served alike—they were as naught in the balance against avarice. He had stained his hands in blood, had burdened his soul with a terrible score of crime; and yet he never regretted having done so—only bewailed the loss of his idolized gold.

"'Twill be mine—all mine now!" he muttered, as he hastened along the rough trail. "All mine—a fortune—a mass of the darling, precious gold; enough to enable me to end my days, far away from here, honored, respected. Shall I—and yet—"

His pace slackened; his thoughts were busy. Until now he had resolved to secure his treasure, then to flee far away, severing all connection with the past. But now—he remembered Edna, the fair girl who had ever proved a true, a dutiful daughter to him. Besides gold, she alone had power to touch his heart. It seemed hard to desert her now, when she was in such sore need of a friendly support. And then he recalled each word that had dropped from the lips of Old Business in the shanty at Dick's Pocket. Not a night passed since then, scarce an hour, but what he had dreamed of or pictured to himself that wonderfully rich pocket, until it seemed to belong by rights to himself. Should he flee, and forever abandon all hopes of possessing it?

"No, I'll kill him and have it all to myself!" he cried, in a hoarse, unnatural voice, unconscious that he spoke aloud. "The others are dead—all but Lynch. I can fool him—I will—"

A slight noise behind him checked the speech, and recalled Brand to a sense of his folly. In an instant he was his usual self—cool, wary and circumspect.

He listened intently. All was still, save for the usual sounds of the night. Then he proceeded, but with more caution than heretofore.

The gray light was spreading in the east, heralding the coming dawn, when Brand paused in a little valley. Through it ran a small creek, but which, during the rainy season, almost filled the valley. Yet there was a landmark that couldn't be mistaken; a large, black boulder near the center of the valley. Below this he knelt and plied his bowie knife with almost insane fury, flinging the dirt behind him in constant spurts.

And then! A harsh, inarticulate cry broke from his lips as the blade touched something hard. He tore it from its resting-place—a nugget of pure gold! Another and another, until he was surrounded by a ring of the dull, yellow metal—a ransom for a king.

Down still deeper he dug, and another cry parted his lips as he came upon a layer of long skin bags, heavy, because full of gold-dust—the lost treasure of Gospel Dick.

"Rich—rich! I can roll in gold now!"

The speech ended with a yell of terror. A heavy hand rested upon Eli Brand's shoulder, a significant *click* sounded in his ear.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WORKING IN THE DARK.

Down—down, through what seemed an immeasurable space, fell Marco of the Scar. Down—down, for what seemed a lifetime—an age of horrible, killing suspense. Then came a dull shock—he had reached the bottom, had been dashed to pieces upon the cold, jagged rocks!

And yet—the pain had not been very great; strange, too, but though he believed the frightful fall had killed him, it seemed as though he was still hovering around the mangled remains, in a spiritualized form—as though he could hear, feel, and see, though indistinctly, as one in a dream.

He heard a footfall, seemingly from above. He glanced upward. A dim, phantom light came shimmering down. Then, amid the soft light, a human head and face gradually shaped itself; a face pale as death, yet wondrously beautiful. The lips moved, and he heard a low, soft voice; the words escaped his ear. Again came the sound. Then another, far different, from close beside him; a deep, hollow groan.

He thought he glanced down, wondering whether the groan could emanate from the mangled remains of what had once been his body. But all was dark. He could see nothing. He glanced upward; the face had vanished, the light was gradually dying away; then it was gone; all was dark. A cloud seemed to pass over his sight—he knew no more.

"Sugar in a rag! Butter in a gourd; sweet Cornelle an' holy Moses! Lay fair, ye durned hedgehog an' quit scrowdgin' an' a-sharpin' your dratted toe-nails on my hide! Don't ye got no more manners then to treat a—hellow! Whar the devil be we, an' who're you, anyway? Speak out; none o' your skin games, or I'll plug ye like a ripe water-million!"

"Old Business—thank God! How came you here?"

"Waal, I'll ber-dog-goned! Ef this don't beat the Dutch, an' the Dutch beat the—chaw my year! Lend me one whar I live, won't ye—do! Giv' me a horn-toad to eat; stick a horn-bug in my ear! 'Pent, sinners, 'pent—'cause the pizen tarantuler o' nat'ral cussedness is a-crawlin' up your trowser's leg—oh—ah!"

"It's me; don't you know? Mark Austin—"

"Oh guseberry juice an' bonny clabber! thunder-bugs an' mush an' milk! Kick me in the short ribs; comb my ha'r with a brickbat; 'cause I'm too sweet to live; I be so! Hush! you're lyin', dog-gone ye; can't fool me! I'm dead, I am; fell down here, seventeen hundred million miles an' got splattered out like a buckwheat slapjack—did so! Didn't I see the little devils in red-hot britches a sweepin' me up in a dust-pan? An' yit—was I dreamin'? Thar ain't much smell o' brimstone, be thar? I've got a cold, reckon."

"Are you mad, old man?" impatiently added the other voice. "Don't you know me? We're here together, in a hole. I fell down—"

"So did I; 'twas last year I started though, I reckon. Mighty nigh starved afore I tetched bottom. Easy, thar—quit kickin', dog-gone ye! Caint be more'n a foot o' airth 'tween us an' China-land. Don't want to bu'st through an' send us both on a journey to the moon, de ye?"

"He's either drunk or crazy!" muttered Mark, disgustedly.

"Thar's a' insult—an' yit, 'pears like I kin taste some sort o' lickin' in my breath, a'ter all. Say—you; how long you bin in this place, anyhow?"

"Not long—it was last night that I left you and Pike."

"Wait—let me think," said Old Business, slowly. "Reckon I must 'a' turned a double summer-set, comin' down hyar, I'm so peskily mixed up, like. Last night, you say? Then I fixed up an' fooled the varmints, we spoilt a lot o' red-hot pizen; I must 'a' drunk more'n I tended to, or else I tumbled down here top eend fust, an' the dog-goned whisky run down into my head—that's it! Young feller, I ax pardon; I'm drunk—drunker'n a b'iled owl—an' am a perfesser, too, oh—ah!"

"Well—there's one consolation; you'll have plenty of time to sober off on, so just roll over a bit. You come down on my—political economy—like a nightmare."

"Thar's it? I felt sumthin' warm a-neath me, an' was afeard to stir, 'cause I thunk 'twas whar I'd bled to death. Thar—I forgive ye, ef ye did kick like thunder; only, your cushion 'd be all the better fer a little more fat, lad; fallin' on them bar' bones ain't much better then rocks—feel like I was stove plum up."

"Look here, old man," cried Mark, with ill-disguised impatience. "As you say, 'nough's enough an' too much's a plenty! Let up on this nonsense, now. We're in a precious hobble here; the question is how we are going to get out?"

"Stan' upon our heads, then let loose all holts an' drap up, feet fust. Thar's easy 'nough."

"Oh, turn it up! Don't try to act the fool; you can't improve on nature. Give me a straight answer, if you can. Who sent you here—who pushed you down?"

"Nobody. Ye see, it kem about jess so. We missed you; I found out you was 'long o' this gang o' cutthroats. Was afeard you'd ferget us, so I kem to hunt ye up. Played bugs on the fools, cleaned 'em out at thar best games, then drunk 'em all drunk, arter which I sot out on a y'y'ge o' diskivery—lookin' fer you. A durned fool wouldn't 'a' found ye, but I did. I sees this hole; thinks I, mebbe he's down thar—here, ye know. 'Twas my last chance, so I jest lepped—"

"Easy, old man, easy there," cautioned Mark.

"Tain't my fault—I can't help it," protested Old Business, earnestly. "Yer see I got to tellin' such gewhollopin' lies to them suckers up thar I cain't scarcely quile my tongue up

nat'ral ag'in. You jest gi' me punch or a histe with your hind leg, whenever you see me jumpin' the trail—"

"All right; I'll do it. But now, about getting out. What can we do? Can't you suggest something?"

"Climb out? I'm wuss'n a tom-cat, that way."

"I've tried it. Though we ain't thirty feet from the top, if even half that, it might as well be a thousand. The hole is small up there, but it swells out on every side below—just like a funnel turned bottomsides up."

Old Business made no reply in words, but carefully picked himself up and when assured that no bones were broken, he slowly made a circuit of the walls, sinking nearly knee deep in the mass of soft, withered grass and moss with which the bottom of the pit was covered.

It may be said here that Isabella had been careful to provide against accident before she pushed Mark into the pit. Though maddened with unrequited love, she was not one to utterly despair at the first or second repulse. She counted upon reducing Austin by solitary confinement, darkness and starvation, until he would gradually yield to her wishes, fondly believing that her mad, overpowering love would, when the first concession was made, soon kindle an answering passion in the heart of the young miner.

"It's a rat-trap, sure enough!" muttered Old Business, once more his natural self. "An' yit—thar's a 'rangement here! I cain't make out—a sorter iron-dofunny an' chain. 'F we only had a light; you hain't got no sech thing as a light 'bout ye?"

"No—nothing of the kind. I thought of that, and hunted close, but couldn't find a single match."

"An' I, like a blamed fool, when I sot out to play the high-toned Greaser on them galoots above, I left my fire-machine 'th my 't'other duds. 'F 'twasn't for the noise, we mought easy git fire, but some o' them long-eared ribs 'd be sure to hear it ef we went to burnin' powder. You're sure—go through your rags once more. Mebbe one's growed sence—"

A glad cry broke from Mark's lips as he held up something that glowed with a peculiar light as he rubbed it with his fingers.

"It's only a little piece, but perhaps 'twill do."

"Here," and the trailer eagerly clutched the fragment of a match. "Now to work. I don't reckon we want to roast ourselves, so we'd better crowd all this stuff into one corner. Work lively, now!"

The dried grass and moss were carefully pushed aside, and then Old Business prepared a little pile of the dry stuff to kindle with the match while Mark nervously twisted up a hard knot of the same to serve as a torch.

It was a breathless moment when Old Business gently struck the match, and they watched the feeble blue flame as it flickered unsteadily, seemingly expiring almost ere it was given life. But then—it touched the tinder—a bright flame started up, and a moment later the grass torch was ignited. Only with the greatest difficulty could the comrades choke down the exultant cry that came to their lips.

"Keep it burnin' fer your life!" muttered Old Business, as he eagerly examined the object that had puzzled him in the dark.

A stout piece of iron—evidently part of a revolver—had been set into the rock. To this bar was welded a chain, running from thence to a stout iron staple, to which it was secured by a large padlock.

"There's an opening here," muttered the trailer, in a low, strained voice. "Only for this chain—"

"We can break it—both together," quickly said Mark.

"We'll try; but mind the light; we may need it again."

Mark stuck the bunch of grass into a niche, and put a handful more beside it; then the two men grasped the chain. Once, twice they exerted their utmost strength, but the stout links would not yield. So absorbed were they in this struggle that neither noted how swiftly the frail torch burned, nor that the loose grass had fallen to the floor. Again and again, but without success. Then a low curse came from the trailer's lips as he sprung toward the expiring torch. He carefully fanned it with his breath, but in vain. The feeble sparks died, one by one; then all was darkness the most intense.

Without a word Old Business pushed Mark aside. He grasped the chain, and with a power that was little short of marvelous, snapped the chain as though it were made of straw. The same effort did more. It caused a large slab of rock to grate upon its cunningly-contrived hinges, and a cry of joy burst from Mark's lips as he thrust his hand into the cavity—his entire arm, yet he could not touch anything save the cold side-walls.

"It's a secret passage!" he cried, hoarsely. "Saved!"

"Mebbe so—mebbe not. Don't crow too soon, lad. Here—I found the hole—let me go fust."

Guided only by the sense of touch, the trailer entered, finding himself in a low, narrow, tunnel-like passage. Carefully feeling his way, he crept on and on, through what seemed an interminable space. The passage was winding and uneven, evidently following the dip and angles of the rock ledge which formed the bottom or floor.

"Hist!" suddenly uttered Old Business.

A dead, heavy sound came to their ears. They could not place it. Now before, now from the rear, below and above, just as they turned their ears. What could it be?

And now, louder and nearer came the strange sound

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A CURIOUS PROCEEDING.

WE have seen how Old Business disposed of his captive, the Mexican outlaw, after having extracted all possible information from him; not all that he desired, still sufficient for his purpose. Then, squatting together beside the stiffening corpse, the two men consulted upon their future course. Lafe Pike seemed thoroughly aroused from the sort of half-stupor of the past two days, and appeared more his old self, shrewd, quick-witted, and sensible.

Yet he could scarcely believe his ears when Old Business made known his plans, or rather the skeleton of them. The Mexican had confessed that the outlaw retreat was near at hand, among the hills; also, that the two captives had been taken there. Though slender enough, the trailer declared this clue to be sufficient. He would play a bold game, would effect an entrance into the retreat, and, if nothing more, pave the way for a more systematic attempt.

Pike listened in mute amazement. It seemed little short of suicide, yet Old Business spoke of the matter as already settled beyond even remonstrance.

"You've got nothin' to do, old man," quoth the trailer, "cept to wait easy ontel we come back. You keep under kiver; don't git too impatient, nor don't make no more noise than you kin handily git along 'ithout, and that's all. You understand?"

Whether Pike comprehended or not, Old Business did not wait for an answer, but girded up his loins and strode away over the hills. In some manner he effected a wondrous alteration in his personal appearance, made an ugly scar where there was no scar before, and then, rigged out in the rich holiday suit of a ranchero, he stepped upon the stage as Marco of the Scar.

Pike, too uneasy to obey his comrade's orders, soon after left the little pocket where the Mexican had found his death, and stole cautiously along the back trail. Fortune seemed to favor him, for, while snugly ensconced in a clump of bushes that grew beside a stunted cedar tree, he saw Marco of the Scar come up the valley, heard him challenged by a concealed guard, heard his bold reply, and, while anxiously awaiting the return of the man who was sent up the opposite hill with a message, Pike had time to recognize his skillfully-disguised comrade in the tall, stately ranchero.

He remained in the bush, while Marco was escorted to the cavern; he waited until the party reappeared. He saw the outlaw chief suddenly level a revolver and fire. He heard the dull thud, he felt a stinging sensation upon one cheek. Fortunately for him his legs refused to obey his will, else Barada's second shot might have been sent after a flying target. Believing himself discovered, Pike could only hug the ground closely and pray for an unsteady aim.

Then came the second marksman; the severed bough fell, not to the ground, but upon Pike's back. By this time he had divined the truth, but he did not breathe comfortably until he saw the last of the party disappear within the cave, without any of their number coming to inspect the double target.

Pike seized the opportunity to retreat, keeping well covered. He could not afford Old Business any assistance. The trailer was, apparently, on the best of terms with the enemy. He, Pike, could only wait as directed.

The old miner glided along, every sense upon the alert for a time. But then the old, absent look came into his eyes, the expression of moody regret or of remorse deepened upon his face. He squatted down beside a moss-grown boulder, and gave himself over to painful brooding upon the past.

Two men came up the valley toward him, conversing eagerly. A louder oath than common partially roused Pike from his reverie. His head was lifted, his eyes were riveted upon the men with a vacant stare. He saw that they were roughly dressed, like old miners; that both were armed with knives and revolvers. In addition, one man carried a heavy iron bar, the other a stout pick-ax. They bore the appearance of prospectors. The eyes of the old miner were fixed upon them, but his mind was far away, busy with the past.

The two men paused when nearly opposite the miner's ambush, and cast long, searching glances around, as though to satisfy themselves that no one was watching them. Pike gave a little start, and his eyes glowed a little. Like all delvers for gold he had dreamed often of hidden treasures, of fabulous stores of the glittering ore, buried by hands that never reclaimed them, of wonderful "pockets," where a single hour's work would enrich a man—ha! Might it not be here that Old Business had found his pocket? And these men—had they also discovered it?

Now thoroughly awake, his blood running hot and cold by turns, Lafe Pike watched the two men.

Whatever their purpose, they seemed to be in no hurry. They cast their tools down at the base of the rocky hill, and one produced a small flask, from which both drank. Then, lighting their pipes, they began work, by attacking the scattered boulders with crow and pick.

They seemed intent only upon building up a huge, cairn-shaped pile of rocks. But with what object? Pike could not even guess. He only knew that there was no treasure, no pocket in the work. The men worked too lazily for that.

The work was slow and tedious. The sun set and night fell. The ambushed miner grew weary watching the two men, and sunk into a troubled reverie. When he roused himself, all was still. He glanced around with a half-stupefied air. Then the rock-pile glimmered in the last rays of the moon. He re-

membered all. He recognized the spot. Yonder, where that rude cairn now stood, was the very spot where all traces of Mark Austin had been lost.

"I'll see what it means—that pile of rock wasn't moved for naught," muttered Pike, as he left his covert and strode across the valley, never once thinking of the risk he might be running by thus exposing himself in the immediate neighborhood of the outlaws' retreat.

But old Pike was peculiar in more than one respect. He had suffered terribly in the past—until his brain gave way, and he awoke to consciousness in a mad-house. After years, he was discharged as cured. Yet he was never fairly himself again, and at times the cruel band seemed tightening round his brain, the dull, blood-red light to burn in his eyes, and the evil spirit to whisper black things in his ear.

Now, he attacked the pile of bowlders with a vigor that seemed beyond his bowed frame, rolling the heavy fragments aside with seeming ease. At times he would pause, not for rest; fatigue did not seem to touch him. With bowed head and pendant arms, he stood deep buried in thought, for minutes at a time. Then, with the same cold, passionless demeanor, he would attack the rock-pile once more.

A gray light was gradually spreading in the east as Pike rolled aside the last rock. He stood there, then, a half-smile upon his lips. A glimpse of a brighter past was in his eyes. The awakening came soon. He felt the ground shake beneath his feet. Scarcely had he realized this when he was flung violently aside, stumbling over a bowlder. With an angry cry, he drew a pistol, but it paused irresolutely, half-poised.

The forms of two men sprung up before him. A glad cry rung in his ears, accompanied by a complacent chuckle.

"Old man—God bless you!" cried Mark Austin, as he sprang forward and grasped the bewildered miner's hand.

Old Business contented himself with replacing the cunningly-contrived trap-door, sifting the loose earth and gravel over it once more. He knew now how they had lost Mark's trail at this point.

"Say, you fellers," he said, bluntly, interrupting the explanations of Austin. "S'pose you put off the rest till another time. I feel oneasier'n a bedbug in these parts, sence it's gittin' light so quick. Puckachee's the word."

"But these rocks—they'll see how we escaped—"

"I'd put 'em back of thar was time; but thar ain't. 'Twon't matter much, anyhow. When we both turn up a-missin', they'll know who to thank fer your disappearance. Come—I don't want to git picked off by some galoot from kiver; that ain't my style."

"Lead on—we'll follow. You're boss, now."

"Keerful, boy. You put yourself under me, an' you won't hev no soft time on it," was the quiet reply, yet uttered in a significant tone. "I've got a big job on my han's, an' thar'll be more hard knocks then soft words in these parts jest now."

"If it's against *them*," and Mark cast a rapid glance back at the hollow mountain. "I only ask that. There's another prisoner there—"

"I know it. I saw her last night—hush. I'll tell you all in good time. It's enough now that I'm goin' to work fer *her* sake, jest as I've bin workin' fer you. I don't think she's in much danger, jest yit, or I'd 'a' kerried her off last night 'stead o' huntin' you out."

"Her—who're you talkin' about?" asked Pike.

"About—never mind; you never saw her," was the abrupt reply. "Here we are; at the 'pocket.' Come in; I reckon we won't none o' us be any the wuss fer a bite to eat."

Together they entered the retreat, where still lay the corpse of the Mexican. Mark shuddered a little as he heard the story; but this did not last long. The bundle of cold provisions which Pike had brought with him from the hut in Dick's Pocket, was opened, and all ate heartily, despite the ghastly object lying so still and motionless beside them. Their nerves fortunately, were strong.

"I reckon we'll have to make a little change in the programme," quoth Old Business, after the edge of his appetite was blunted. "Last night's work hes opened my plans wider'n I looked fer. Now, I don't mind tellin' you that this diskivery—I mean of whar this gang hangs out when they're to home—is the main thing I've bin workin' fer. We'll make it pan out big, too, ef you'll jine teams with me."

"I thought that was understood," grunted Pike.

"We'll call it so, then. We're pardners in this, jest as we air in my 'pocket.' I've bin thinkin' o' that, too. I don't like the idee o' leavin' it quite so high this hornit's-nest. S'pose some o' them fellers 'd stumble onto it, jest as I did? That'd be a scaly joke, wouldn't it? Waal, then, I reckon we'd better 'tend to it fust—"

The speech was never completed. Sharp and clear rung out the report of a fire-arm, closely followed by a wild yell, so shrill and piercing, so full of a terrible agony, that it could not be misinterpreted.

There was death in the air. Either murder was being done, else a fatal accident had occurred, and that not many rods distant from their cover.

CHAPTER XXIX.

DEAR GOLD.

"Arsy, ye owld divvle; jist smell the taste o' that, an' thin thank yer pattrern saint that I'm givin' yez time to say an
"P"

Eli Brand, his face white with terror, more through dread

of losing his precious gold than from personal fear, turned his head and looked over his shoulder. As he did so, the dark muzzle of a revolver looked him full in the eye. The weapon was at full cock. A slight contraction of the finger now upon the trigger would scatter his brains to the winds. Nor did a glance up at the red, enraged face of the man whose hand grasped his shoulder with painful force tend to relieve his fears.

"It's this is the way ye play off on yer fr'inds and parthners, is it, ye blackavised joskin? Ye stale away in the night an' dig up the gould—the swate, purty gould we are all to share in—like the owld divvle's hog that ye are! an' think to kape it all to yerself? Ow! ye murtherin' thaife o' night! What's the r'ason I shouldn't blow yer dirty brains out for the crows to ate?"

"Careful, there, you stupid idiot!" said Brand, affecting an anger that might serve to hide his actual fear. "Don't you know better than to handle a pistol in that careless manner? Drop it, I say—or cursed if I have anything more to do with you. You hear?"

The Irishman was plainly taken aback by this bold speech, which placed him in the position Brand should have occupied. Unlike the majority of his countrymen, he was far from being quick-witted. He made a good follower; he was bold, stubborn and without scruples, but he could not lead.

"You're drunk, Lynch; that's what's the matter with you," added Eli Brand, once more himself as he realized his advantage. "There—you needn't take the trouble to deny it. I'd hate to believe you were sober, for then I couldn't trust you again. I don't allow men to accuse me wrongfully, twice, in their sober senses."

"Mebbe I did dhrink a wee drap too much," muttered Lynch, scratching his head doubtfully. "But the gould—what was ye doin' wid it, thin?"

"We're good friends and true comrades, Mickee, so I'll tell you all about it," added Brand, in a confidential tone, but with an evil light in his eye that Lynch, unfortunately for himself, did not observe. "You thought I was playing bugs on you—that I had found the pocket we heard that fellow, Old Business, talk about, and that I meant to cheat you (since the others are all rubbed out) out of your share, by carrying the gold away and hiding it in another place. Now, didn't you?"

"Wasn't it natheral?" doggedly muttered Lynch.

"I'm not saying it wasn't, Mickee, looking at the matter from your standpoint. No, your suspicions were natural enough, only you might have known that I wouldn't have cheated a friend; but let that pass. This gold belongs to me, alone. I hid it here nearly three years ago, as you can see, by the date of this paper. Ah, I forgot that you can't read. Never mind. You can't well doubt me, after I tell you that I am willing to divide with you—to give you one-half of this gold—"

"You ain't lyin'—" muttered Lynch, brushing the moisture from his brow, an eager light in his eyes.

"No, I'm in earnest. Only—you can keep a secret?"

"Try me," was the prompt reply. "For a fr'ind, I kin."

"Good enough! Well, then, half of this gold is yours; your share will pan out about twenty-five thousand dollars, Mickee. Hush—wait until I am through. Not only is one half of this yours, but I know where we can lay hands on ten times as much. Yes, I have found out that old rascal's secret, and we will empty his precious pocket, you and I, Mickee, my man!"

"I'd go to the divvle fer ye, twice over, fer half the money, an' say thank ye into the bargain—I would so! But ye mane it? Ye ain't comin' the blarney over me?"

"No; honor bright, Mickee; surely you can trust me, after what I have told you. But listen. I'll give you another proof; I'll put my very life in your hands. Then you'll believe I'm in sober earnest."

"The fact is," continued Brand, speaking in a low, confidential tone, as he squatted over the pile of gold and deliberately filled his pipe, "the fact is, Mickee, I'm tired of the kind of life we're leading. It's all very well for a change, but it's too slow to suit me. Now, I've made up my mind to cut loose from the band, and strike out for myself. With this gold, together with what we can make out of this pocket of that old fool, we can afford to put on style and cut a splurge, if we wish. We—for, of course, you mean to stick by me—will make our way to Frisco, take passage on the first steamer for, say England or Ireland. 'Twouldn't be safe to stop in the States, for some years, at least, for you know how strict the oath of the band is. We'd be hunted out and killed, sure."

"There—I think I have proved my faith in you, for were you even to hint at what I have just said, where Barada could get hold of it, my head wouldn't be worth a single smell of whiskey."

"Divvle a Lynch in the wurruld was iver a thraitor, nor will Mickee be the first to play the dirty informer," earnestly replied the Irishman.

"Good enough! I knew I could trust you, old man," said Brand, frankly enough; yet there was a devilish glitter in his eye that boded no good for his trusting comrade. "First, we will take and put this stuff in a better place; some of the boys might chance by and take a notion to see who had disturbed the ground here, and what for. Come, off with your breeches; they're stouter than mine, and these precious nuggets are too heavy for anything else to stand the pressure."

Nothing loth, Lynch took off his trowsers, and first tying the bottoms of the legs firmly, tenderly dropped the rough, irregular nuggets of gold into the novel receptacle, while Eli Brand secured the skin-bags containing the dust and *pepites*.

An eavesdropper would have declared that the two men

were upon the best of terms, that they trusted each other without a single doubt or scruple to mar the harmony that should always exist between bosom friends. And yet, while his tongue was uttering seemingly sincere expressions of friendship, while he was planning their future course in life as true brothers in everything, Eli Brand was carefully maturing a foul act of treachery—was studying how he could best murder his comrade.

Together the two men trudged away from the rifled cache, weighted down by the burden of gold—already blood-stained, yet fated to receive another horrible baptism—Eli Brand beguiling the way with his smooth, plausible tongue.

He selected a spot where, as he said, the gold could rest without fear of discovery, until they could secure that other treasure and complete their arrangements for abandoning the band. Then, carefully obliterating all traces of their work, even breaking their trail for some yards around the cache, Brand led the way toward the cave.

"We must act like foxes, Mickee," he said, chuckling grimly. "Barada is no fool, and let him once get wind of what we are thinking of, and—good-by, John!"

The unsuspicious Irishman cheerfully assented to everything, and trudged on, little dreaming of what was in store.

Brand did not hesitate. He had decided that Lynch must die, and when about half a mile from the new cache, he allowed the Irishman to pass him. Silently drawing a revolver, he cocked and discharged it with almost the same motion, its muzzle so close to the victim's head that the hair was scorched and the skin blackened by the discharge.

One wild, horrible yell burst from the poor devil's lips, as he staggered blindly forward, then fell, the mingled blood and brains oozing from his shattered skull. With an angry, exultant snarl, not unlike that of a maddened panther, Eli Brand sprung upon his victim, burying the long blade of his knife once, twice to the very haft between his shoulders. Then, assured that his foul work was well done, he sprung to his feet and darted away from the spot with all the speed at his command, never once glancing behind him.

Better for him, perhaps, if he had glanced back; at least his end might have been different. He would have seen three men gliding through the bushes, gradually approaching the murdered man. Might have seen them pause beside the body; one stooped and turned him over.

"He's did fer," muttered Old Business, glancing at his companions. "He's got enough to kill a mule!"

Lynch opened his eyes. Though fast filming over with death, they possessed the light of reason.

"He killed me—Eli Brand," fell from his lips in slow, painful speech. "I didn't think it o' him, the snake in the grass! But I'll be revinged—I'll be revinged!"

Then, incoherently, scarcely to be understood, he confessed the whole truth. How they had unearthed the gold and placed it in a new cache; even gave them directions for finding it, adding with his fast-fleeting breath:

"Take it—take it all! Don't let that cursed rapparee iver set his dirty eyes on it. Don't—or my curse—the curse iv a dyin', murdered man lie upon ye forever an' iver!"

He was sinking fast, yet he smiled faintly when assured that Brand should never again touch the blood-stained gold. He raved feebly of the old country, of his mother, of a little colleen whose eyes had been dimmed with tears as she bade him farewell and God-speed his quick return with a fortune from the wonderful land toward the setting sun; and then, with her name upon his lips, together with a broken prayer to Holy Mary, he died.

Silently Old Business placed the lifeless clay in a little hollow, cast a handful of leaves over the bloody form, then piled heavy rocks over all. 'Twas a rude burial; a fitting end for a wild, reckless life like his.

"Now fer the gold," said Old Business, in his old tone. "That pizen cuss shain't hev none of it, even ef I hev to swaller the hull lot—so thar!"

The spot was found, the treasure collected, and Old Business led the way down to the creek. After wading down its bed for some little distance, he selected a deep, dark pool, and cast his treasure into the water.

"It'll lay thar ontel the crack o' doom, unless we fish fer it fust. An' now, while we're in the humor, reckon we'd better look a'ter our t'other bit o' wealth. Lucky 'tain't fur from this place. Come."

He led the way up the valley, his keen eyes roving around as though in quest of some landmark.

"Yender 'tis—at the foot o' that rock, yender, you'll find my pocket. I didn't look into it very deep, but ef what I seed is a fair sample o' the rest, I reckon we'll pan out 'bout seventy million! Fact, by thunder!"

Eagerly the three men ran toward the indicated rock, nor was Old Business the least agitated of the three.

CHAPTER XXX.

A LEAF FROM THE PAST.

A SHARP cry of anger broke from the lips of the trailer, echoed back by exclamations of surprise from his comrades. The soil at the base of the huge boulder was torn and trampled.

"Robbed! some one has been before us!" snarled Old Business, his eyes glittering venomously.

"Are you sure—is there no mistake?" ventured Mark.

"This is the spot; you can see for yourself," shortly replied the trailer, as he bent low, his eye closely scrutinizing the ground. "Two men have been here—ha!"

He produced the little package of strings before alluded to, and selecting one of the thongs, carefully compared it with one of the footprints. Then he raised his head with a quizzical glance and half-smile.

"It's my treat, boys—sech a double an' twisted fool as I've bin! Jest think o' me—Old Business in a minnit—think o' my bein' sucked in like that! What I tuck fer a 'pocket' was somebody's cache; an' all 'cause I was in too big a hurry to 'zamine the thing close," said the trailer, in a tone of utter disgust. Then seeing that his meaning was still obscure he added:

"This is the how. I stopped by this rock, t'other day, to grub. I was as busy thinkin' as eatin', an' as a critter will do sometimes when he don't know it, I was foolin' with my knife in the ground. Fust thing I knowed, I flopped up a nugget o' gold, nigh half a pound weight. Nat'ally that waked me up all over, an' I looked funder. The little chunks o' gold was layin' thick as six in a bed with three in the middle. I thought 'twas a pocket, but couldn't stop to fool then. Kivered it up, then hunted up you two fellers. Now you see, somebody's bin here, an' our pocket turns out to be no better'n a empty cache!"

"But why cache? I don't see why—"

"Look: one, two—hafe a dozen; three marks was made by bags o' dust. Does gold-dust gen'ally grow in skin saggies? Sca'cely—leastways, not in 'pockets' made by natur? Then it's a cache. More'n that, 'twas that Eli Brand cuss who emptied it. Yes—I've got his measure here; I ain't goin' it blind. So, you see, all's serene, sence we've got the do-funny."

If not convinced, Mark and Pike were silenced. Some points in the trailer's explanation seemed rather weak, but since their acquaintance, Old Business had gained such an ascendancy over their minds, that either would as soon have distrusted his own senses as the words of their friend.

"So much for so much, then; we'll call that matter settled. Now fer more 'portant business. Old man, jest take the trouble to open your ears, an' keep 'em so while I'm speakin'. Mind, now; I kin prove every word I'm goin' to say. Your real name is Harvey Wilson; you are a native of Baltimore, you were an inmate of an insane asylum. And now—shall I tell you what you were put in there for?"

Pike crouched upon the ground, his face livid with an unutterable horror, his eyes wild and glaring as those of a wild beast. His lips parted, his throat worked, but the words would not come forth. In a low, steady tone Old Business continued:

"You see I know all; that all is much more than you ever dreamed of. Listen. I pledge you my word as a man, that you are far less guilty than you think. As God hears me, your daughter is still living."

With an inarticulate cry Pike sprung forward and clasped the trailer's knees. His features were frightfully convulsed, his eyes, bloodshot and wild as those of a madman, eloquently pleaded for what his tongue failed to utter.

"Wait," was the cold reply. "A few days will seem short after all these weary years. You must earn the reward first. Are you willing?"

"Yes—anything," gasped Pike. "Only tell me what it is you expect, what it is you require of me!"

"You know where Wild-cat is? Good! I will give you a note, which you must place in the hands of Mat Blaine, the sheriff. You understand?"

While speaking, Old Business was hastily making some hieroglyphics upon the leaf of a small note-book, which he produced from an inner pocket.

"Deliver this, then return, and I will tell you where you can find your child, alive and well. Fail, and you shall never see her again. Now go. Remember, the sooner you deliver that note and return with the answer, the sooner will you see your child. If I don't meet you on the road, make at once for the little cave beneath the three cedars; you know where."

"You swear that you are not deceiving me?"

"I swear it, by the mother who bore me, by the God who made me," was the earnest and solemn reply.

Without another word Pike darted away upon his mission. Old Business turned to Mark, who had stood in open-mouthed astonishment during this strange interview, and addressed him in the old, whimsical manner.

"The old 'un scratches gravel mighty peert, don't he? Waal, thar's need o' haste. You 'nd I, too, hev got work to do, an' we'd better be 'bout it. You see'd how he trusted me; will you do the same?"

"I must help her," said Mark.

"That's swore to. Afore this time ro-morrow, the little gal'll be free as yender squirrel, or Old Business'll be dead."

"Who and what are you, anyhow?" demanded Mark, looking into his comrade's face with something akin to awe.

"A man—a pore, forlorn critter which is a-wanderin' round an' round in this 'ere wale o' sorrers an' kenyon o' troubles an' tribbleations, called by them what hain't hed the double fist o' 'ligion knockin' at the front door o' thar hearts, the beautiful world, which they never think is only a tavern put up fer the 'commodation o' us pore, pilgrimatin' sinners toe tarry a bit at when we git futsore an' weary an' want to take a snooze. Oh—oh!" and Old Business nodded complacently toward Mark, a mild, benign light shining in his eyes.

"That means—none of my business?" with a half laugh.

"Young man, you're an ornament to your sect—a honor to

them which brung you up. You kin see through a hole furdern any o' them whose eyes ain't better'n yours. An' yit—I don't know. Mebbe we won't never hev a better time, an' the truth must out some time. Ay! so be it, then! Come—and prepare your mind for sad, bitter tidings."

Old Business set off across the valley at a rapid pace. Mark followed close at his heels, yet there was something so strange and unlike his usual self in the trailer, that he kept a hand upon one of the revolvers taken from the murdered Irishman. He half-believed that Old Business was crazy.

It was nearly noon when the two entered Dick's Pocket. Not until he passed by the ruins of the shanty and seated himself upon a rock beside the green, oblong mound, did Old Business speak. The nasal twang had disappeared with the uncouth dialect.

"Young man," he began, in a clear, distinct voice. "You have asked who and what I am, and I have brought you here, beside this grave—the grave of the man who was called Gospel Dick—to satisfy your curiosity. You have heard of a man called Philip Epes?"

"Uncle Phil—what of him?" cried Mark, eagerly.

"Your uncle—that is, the half-brother of your father. He was a hard case, this Phil—"

"Stop! what right have you to slander the dead, and to me?" demanded Mark, his face flushing hotly.

"The truth is no slander, boy; I only speak of what I know. And yet, reckless, ne'er-do-weel as Phil Epes was, it would have gladdened his heart to have heard such words from your lips."

"If he only could! He was misunderstood in life, but the truth came out at last. Too late, though, for him; when we sought for him we found his grave."

"You are deceived again; you found another grave, not mine. Yes, Mark, my boy—I am Phil Epes. Ah, I was afraid of that," he added, sadly, as Mark drew back with a look of doubt. "But never mind; you will believe me in time, for I have plain evidence to prove all I assert. No—wait; wait until I tell you all, then if you offer your hand I will accept it."

"Listen, now. If you have heard how I left home, very well; if not, let it pass for the present. Enough that I parted from your father with anger upon both sides—parted never to meet again in life. When he cast me off, swearing that henceforth he had no brother, I went to the bad, in sober earnest. I became a gambler, a desperado; yet, though blood stained my hands, 'twas shed only in self-defense. The stakes were even—life against life. But there! I cannot trace out my life, step by step, to-day. There is something in the air that chokes me. Enough that I went back, at last, to seek a reconciliation with him—your father. Then I learned of his strange disappearance, here, in the mines. I came here, resolved to unravel the mystery, though it took a lifetime."

"And you failed—just as I have," muttered Mark, painfully.

"No, I succeeded. Yes—though I did not find him—"

"You found—you found his—" faltered the young miner.

"His grave—yes. Bear up, lad," he added, touching Mark gently. "You must have expected this. Your vain search must have prepared you. And there is more to come; you have not heard the worst. Your father was murdered! Stop—sit down here beside me, and hear me out."

Mark couldn't resist the strong will of his companion, and crouched upon the ground trembling like a leaf. Old Business clearly and succinctly repeated the story of Gospel Dick, told him how he had arrived at the truth, how he had followed the winding trail through all its crossings; but which need not be recapitulated here. Enough that Gospel Dick and John R. Austin were one and the same person.

"I am not positive, yet I would almost swear that I know his murderer's name," added the trailer. "The crime rests between two persons; both of them are here, within reach of our hands. Yes—I understand. You shall have your share in the work. Only for that I would not have brought you here. Now—over his grave, over all that remains of your murdered father: here, palm to palm, I ask you to join with me in the oath to avenge him. Are you ready and willing?"

Mark made no reply in words but arose, and then, with bared heads and crossed palms they mutually swore to know no rest till the murdered man was fearfully avenged. Then, not before, Mark spoke:

"You say the deed is between two men; their names?"

"One is called Vincente Barada, the other Eli Brand."

A sharp cry broke from Mark's lips, as he started back. Old Business smiled sadly. He read the action aright; he knew that Mark was thinking of her—of Edna Brand.

At that moment a crashing sound came from the hillside above, and drew their attention in that direction. They saw the displaced rock bounding toward them—and more, they distinguished a number of dark figures darting through the undergrowth—caught the bright glimmering of the sun upon leveled weapons—heard the sharp cry:

"Thar they be—sock it to 'em, pards—who-oo!"

Then came the sharp rattle of firearms—the hillside was marked here and there with tiny puffs of blue, fleecy smoke.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AT WORK.

"KIVER, lad—to kiver!" cried Old Business, as he flung an arm around Austin's waist and flung him quickly aside as the pistol bullets began to patter around them. "Into the bresh, yender—quick! Then sock daylight right through the fust cuss you kin sight. Who-oo! ye devils—ye omanly mud-turkles o' perdition—ye caterwaulin' hyenas o' thunder an' guns—ye two-legged tarantulers o' sinful sin—hyar's the place to git your money back, an' more, too! Ef you're looking fer us, hyar we be—the high-toned catawaran o' knock-'em-stiff, the green-tailed bedbug o' Sleepy Holly—hi-yah!"

The trailer's last words were blended with the sharp report of his revolver, and with a wild, agonized scream, one of the men upon the hillside sprung convulsively forward, turning in the air and alighting headforemost upon a jagged bowlder twenty feet below.

A united yell of rage followed this blow, and the comrades of the death-stricken man charged down the hillside, pouring a volley of lead into the clump of bushes behind which the two miners had sought refuge.

The instant after firing, Old Business closely hugged the ground, holding Mark down with a strength the young man could not resist. Thanks to this precaution, nearly all of the bullets passed over their bodies, harmlessly. One ploughed its way through the fleshy part of the trailer's shoulder; the wound, though bleeding profusely, seemed to act as a spur, to arouse the worst passions of the old man's nature.

"Thar's only five—we must wipe 'em out; mind, not one must git away, or they'll spile our plans. Up, now, and show yourself a man!"

The last words were uttered almost in a shriek, and Old Business, unable to control himself any longer, sprung to his feet and opened fire upon the enemy, who, five in number, were nearly at the base of the hill; that is some twenty paces from the two men.

His face inflamed, his eyes glaring like living coals and almost bursting from their sockets, uttering a hoarse, maddening cry as he leaped forward, Old Business seemed transformed into a very demon. The outlaws, daring and reckless as they undoubtedly were, under ordinary circumstances, seemed fairly cowed, and though they returned the trailer's fire, it was with anything but precision.

Mark was no laggard. He rose and, selecting his man, fired as coolly as though merely practicing at an inanimate target. The burly outlaw plunged forward, sorely wounded. Then, with a clear shout, Mark sprung forward to the assistance of his new-found relative.

But his aid wasn't needed. Thrice, in as many seconds, the trailer's revolver spoke, and as often a foeman sunk to the ground dead or dying, checked by the unerring bullet. Again the hammer fell; but this time no report followed the explosion of the cap; the pistol had missed fire.

Until now almost paralyzed with horror, this escape seemed to give the sole surviving outlaw strength to flee, and turning, he darted down the valley with a yell of terror. But the flight was short. With a terrible curse, Old Business bounded forward like some maddened wild beast. Then he drew back his arm and hurled the pistol with all the power at his command. The heavy weapon struck the outlaw full upon the back of the neck, felling him as the butcher's ax fells the bullock. Old Business flashed forth his knife and bent over the quivering body; but the weapon was not required. Either the blow or the fall had broken the fugitive's neck.

The trailer brushed the perspiration from his brow and glanced around. He saw Mark Austin gazing upon him with a look of mingled awe and wonder. His face suddenly blanched, and a faint smile parted his lips; a smile, not of pride, but seemingly one of pain and regret.

This lasted only for a moment; then he was once more the careless, imperturbable Old Business.

"I don't reckon they made much on this lay, young feller 'Pears like the onsensible fools must 'a' run ag'inst our bullets a-puppse, just to cheat us out o' sheer o' the fun."

"This is horrible!" muttered Mark, brushing the cold drops from his brow as he glanced around the bloody scene. "It looks more like murder—"

"'Twas either them or us," sharply interrupted the trailer. "They fired the first shot, and meant to murder us—since you like the word. We only acted in self defense."

Mark was quieted, if not convinced. Old Business took a rapid survey of the fallen. Incredible as it may seem, only one was alive; and he fast dying. The trailer questioned him sharply, but the wretch only replied by wild, incoherent ravings of his childhood's home—of his mother, his sister, and brother. Then—a burst of blood from his lips, and all was over.

"Come," muttered Old Business; "we ain't got much time to waste, but we'll put these karkidges whar the wolves nur buzzards won't pester 'em."

This work occupied but little time. The bodies were rolled into a little gully, some earth pushed over them, then a dozen heavy bowlders served to cover all. It was a rude burial, but the two men knew full well that it was better treatment than would have befallen them, had the victory rested with the outlaws.

"There's no doubt about their being after us?"

This was more nearly a question than an assertion, and as such Old Business answered it.

"They was after me, no doubt. I don't think they even so

much as 'spected who you was, only they knowed they couldn't take one 'thout t'other. This 's the way I read the a'fa'r. This mornin' I turned up missin'; that little fack made the head galoot, Barada, sure his 'spicions was right—that I was actin' as a sort o' spy, ye know. In course he gets red-hot, sends out a lot o' his boys with orders to take me or bu'st. These fellows stumbled onto us, an'—bu'sted. So much fer me.

"On your side, I'll bet money this is the lay-out. From what you told me 'bout that blackeyed woman, I judge she's dead-struck on you. She socked you down in that hole, but you kin bet high that she knowed all about that grass an' moss an' felt dead sure you wouldn't git much hurt. She meant to try ef darkness an' a plentiful supply o' nothin' to eat an' drink wouldn't bring ye down to the lovin' point. She'd make ye think ye was to starve to death, then, when you war drawed down purty fine, she'd come and give ye another trial. That's why I think you hain't been missed yet, an' ef I'm right, we'll have the little gal safe out o' thar this very night," and Old Business nodded his head complacently.

"You mean to—" began Mark, eagerly.

"Just so; but ef you've no 'bjections, I reckon we'd better be gittin' away from this place. Noise travels a long distance, an' thar's no tellin' how many more o' our fri'nds thar is in these parts. Come; I'll take you to my *cache*; we kin talk thar while I'm puttin' on my old rig. 'Twouldn't be healthy fer Marco of the Scar to loaf 'round these parts very long."

Leading the way, Old Business rapidly left Dick's Pocket behind. Both men kept a keen lookout, for if the trailer's surmise was right, the outlaws would spare no pains to punish the bold spy who had so completely deceived them, and another collision might not end so favorably.

At length Old Business, after a long and careful look around, parted a screen of bushes that lined the foot of a precipitous hill, and signed for Mark to follow. Austin found himself in a small, close cave or den, lighted imperfectly by several small, irregular openings in the rock above. There were no signs of it ever having been occupied, until Old Business raised a flat rock from one corner of the uneven floor, revealing several packages, prominent among which was his beloved rifle.

"This is my wardrobe," chuckled the trailer, as he unrolled the ragged suit worn when he first met Mark, and set a small bit of looking-glass where the light from above fell full upon his face. "It's a pity to spile sech a purty scar, but *business*."

He washed off the painted scar, carefully removed the false mustache and laid it aside with the wig that hid his own close-cropped hair. In place of these he donned the shaggy wig and tobacco-stained beard, so much more appropriate to the character of Old Business. Meanwhile his tongue was not idle.

"You want to know what my 'rangements air fer to-night. Waal, they're easy told. Fust, we'll lay 'round kinder loose till night. We kin sneak up close enough 'mong the rocks to see ef anythin' 'stronary is goin' on at the cavern. When dark comes, we'll go 'round to the hole—the one we come out of, you know. Ef they hain't found out that you're missin', all's serene; the job's good as did. You see that quile o' rope? With that, it'll be easy 'nough to git up out o' that hole we both tumbled in. Then I'll strike a bee line fer the place whar I seed her last night; I'll tell her you're a-waitin', jest red-hot to make love to her. In course she'll go with me, then. We'll take the back trail, travel hot-foot for Wild Cat, whar you two kin wait for me while I go back with Matt Blaine an' his *posse* to clean out the gang. See?"

The plan sounded so plausible, and the trailer spoke so confidently, as though there was not the remotest chance of failure, that Mark gradually became his old self, cheerful, and full of confidence.

Old Business completed his toilet, and then, after a close examination satisfied himself that there were no curious eyes near to watch them, he led the way toward the hill retreat of Barada's band.

It was mid afternoon when the two men succeeded in gaining a position from whence they could look down upon the long ledge that extended before and upon both sides of the cave entrance. No one could pass in or out without their seeing him, and satisfied of this, they lay quietly under cover, waiting for the moment of action.

All was quiet in the vicinity. Only the initiated could have suspected the existence of such a formidable league in that place.

Then two men made their appearance upon the ledge. A long breath hissed through the trailer's lips as he recognized Vincente Barada and Eli Brand, and his fingers closed upon Mark's arm with a force that caused him to wince.

The two men seemed deep in conversation, but Old Business strained his ears in vain. The words were inaudible. Then Barada ran lightly down the hill, followed by Brand. If they continued in this course, the trail would carry them close to the ambush of the spies. Holding their breath and lying low, the two men waited.

"I tell you you *must* come, or they'll begin to think we're putting up a job on them. Besides, I've got work for you to do there to-night."

These words were uttered by Pacific Pete as he passed within a dozen steps of the ambush. The trailer's eyes glowed like living coals, as he hissed in Mark's ear:

"We've got him now—the murderer of your father!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

A MASTER STROKE.

THAT word decided Mark. His veins seemed filled with fire, and a deadly light shone in his eyes as he sprung forward. Upon that moment hung the lives of more than one of the party. Though surprised, the two outlaws could easily have protracted the struggle until assistance could arrive from the cavern, when Old Business and Mark must flee for life or die fighting. In any case this carefully laid plan would be frustrated.

With a grating curse the trailer sprung up and clutched Austin by the throat, bearing him back to the ground with as much ease, apparently, as though dealing with a child, and held him motionless behind the screen of bushes. All this could not be done without more or less noise being made, and the two outlaws glanced quickly back. But nothing suspicious met their eyes, and once more they pushed on, over the ridge.

"Look here, boy," said Old Business, in a low, grating whisper; "you make another move like that and we part company. I thought you had *some* sense!"

"You said that was the man who murdered father," gasped Mark, fingering his throat, where were plainly to be seen the five livid prints of the trailer's fingers.

"So he did—one of them. But it's not now that he must pay the forfeit. There's the girl to think of, too. If I hadn't checked you all would have been lost. Now take your choice of two things. Either you must be content to wait for *my* word, or else we will part here, each to do his own work in his own way. Which is it?"

"You don't mean to let *him* escape?"

"No; his trail is nearly run out. Before this week is ended he will have his deserts."

"That's enough, then. I will follow you in everything, nor make a single move without your permission."

"Good enough. The fust thing, then, is to follow and keep them two galoots in sight. I think they're headin' fer Windy Gap, an' ef so, you jest bet we're gwine to hev some fun. Easy, now—keep kivered as well as you kin. I don't reckon 't would be healthy fer us ef any o' them varmints in the cave yender should sight us. When we oncet cross the ridge, we'll hev easier work. Watch me and do likewise."

Using every possible precaution to avoid discovery from the rear as well as front, the comrades passed on up the hill. Pausing upon the ridge, they peered cautiously forward from beneath a scrubby brush. Half-way down the declivity they saw Barada and Brand.

"Watch, now," eagerly muttered Old Business. "Ef they take the down trail thare's little doubt but they're goin' to town. Hal didn't I tell ye? Glory be to Moses! the keerds is runnin' my way at last!"

The outlaw chief and his follower struck into the plain trail leading down to Windy Gap, and the next moment disappeared amid the shadows which filled the valley. The sun had already sunk behind the evergreen hills, and twilight was of brief duration in the Valley Mines.

"Now listen, young feller," hurriedly said Old Business. "I want to take that Pacific Pete cuss pris'ner, you understand, fer two reasons. One is, with him in our grip, we kin do what we please with them t'eners at the cave, an make 'em give up the gal by threatenin' to rub *him* out. T'other is, I want to git some news from him."

"You'll foller them, keepin' near enough to make sure they don't give ye the slip, but not so close that they'll smell ye out. That would be powerful onhealthy. I'll take a short cut 'cross the hills, an' git to Windy Gap fust. You close up on 'em when they near the town, an' hold yourself ready to lend me a hand whenever I pitch in. Remember, though, no burnin' powder. They ain't neither on 'em to be hurt; only tuck pris'ners. You understand?" concluded the trailer.

Mark did understand, and then they parted, he to follow the outlaws, Old Business to make all haste to Windy Gap. He covered the distance in a wonderfully short time, when the rough, broken ground is considered, never pausing for breath until the narrow valley, or pass, was reached, which led westward from Windy Gap. He knew that his game must pass by this point, and felt pretty confident that he was before them.

He was not kept long in waiting. From down the pass came the faint echo of footsteps, mingled with the indistinct murmur of human voices in conversation. Not a moment did Old Business lose, but arose and staggered down the pass, reel'ng from side to side, singing in anything but a musical voice, interrupting himself frequently with an oath as he stumbled and nearly fell at full length—a perfect representation of a drunken miner upon his travels.

Yet through it all he noticed that the voices and footsteps ceased, and could just distinguish two dark figures standing together in the deep shadow. Pathetically affirming:

"My name it is Joe Bowers, I'm all the way from Pike,"

Old Business lurched heavily aside and staggered full against the two men. A keen glance told him that he had made no mistake, and, with a single blow he knocked Eli Brand off his legs and a dozen feet away, then grasped Pacific Pete round the body, pinning both arms to his side and holding him helpless as an infant.

"Make a sound louder than a whisper and I'll kill you like a rat! You know *me*!" he hissed into the outlaw's ear.

"What's all this rumpus?" demanded a voice, as the tall figure of a man came out of the shadows.

"Jest in time, boy—you see I didn't brag a mite too much. But fust—lend that or'nary cuss a kick under the ear. Don't be too p'lite—never mind ef you do hurt your corns. Give 'im a buster—he's such a dog-gone hog he'll git mad ef ye don't give him all you've got."

Mark obeyed, in part, at least, but the touch of his heavy cowhide boot was far more gentle than it would have been but for remembering that the quivering wretch was the father of Edna. Then the young miner sprung to the trailer's side.

"What now—want any help with this one?"

"Pull the rope from round my waist—you know whar I put it. So—now take a hitch round this critter's corpus, and see 't you hold him tight, while I look to his weapons. Mind your eye, now. He's slippery'r'n a hunk 'o hog meat fried in a lard."

Either Pacific Pete was badly frightened or, the most probable explanation, he knew that any attempt at escape would be worse than useless, under the circumstances. At any rate, he made no resistance, while Mark wound the rawhide cord firmly around his arms above the elbow, drawing them close together behind his back. Then Old Business removed the revolvers from the captive's belt and secured them upon his person, together with a richly-jeweled poniard taken from Pacific Pete's bosom.

At this moment Eli Brand uttered a groan, and lifted himself to a sitting posture. With a curse, Old Business sprung toward him and dealt him a fierce kick upon the side of the head. Brand fell back insensible, quivering in every muscle.

"F you run with me, boy, you've got to l'arn to do up your work better than that," grumbled the trailer, as his hold closed upon the outlaw chief's shoulder. "He might 'a' plugged either on us, then, or give a yell that'd bring the hull town down on our backs; which wouldn't be very healthy, scene we're counted as woman-stealers, thanks to these two ju-licious whang-doodles."

"You're going to leave him here, then?"

"Must. Don't like to, but it caint be helped. One's all we kin manidge, an' this is the biggest toad. It's the little one we want to git, an' this one 'll be—"

"You said that one of these men murdered my father," persisted Mark, in a low but vindictive tone. "Which one?"

"You want revenge; that's nat'ral enough. So do I. I've swore to hev it, nur I won't go back on my word. But not to-night. One thing at a time; they'll last longer, 'an 'll be better done. Thar—you needn't kick. I've said it, an' that's enough. The time 'll come, when you kin square up all accounts, but you must wait fer the word, which I won't give until I git a good ready."

Mark was forced to submit, though with an ill grace. Day by day the influence which Old Business had gained over him was increasing, and when their wishes clashed, the weaker was forced to give way.

"May I ask the reason of this brutal and unprovoked assault?" at this point Pacific Pete spoke, his voice sounding low and singularly soft. "If robbery is your object, you will make little by carrying me off, now. Still, as I have business on hand, of importance, if you will mention the value you set upon my person, I will give you an order for the amount. It will be paid without any questions, at the Golden Horn."

"Ef your house yender was made of solid gold, an' every livin' critter in it was so many big diamonds, without crack or flaw, the hull lot wouldn't begin to ransom one o' your finger-nails," was the sharp retort. "I don't reckon you know who I be, though you *did* seem to recognize me t'other day at the Hole in the Wall. I've bin on your trail fer some years, now, but you're holed at last, an' I reckon when we git through a-settlin' up, thar won't be 'nough o' you left to grease a single patch fer a rifle-bullet. But thar—we'll finish our little pow-wow when we git to our hotel. Mark, you walk on ahead, takin' the trail for the cave. Your boss 'll foller him, an' mind, ef you git to cuttin' up any shines, or turn balky, you'll find a pizen nasty driver's got a hold of the ribbons. Gee-up thar—puckachee!" and Old Business twitched sharply the rope which secured the arms of the captive outlaw chief.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

OLD BUSINESS EFFECTS A TRADE.

THE little cave or den beneath the three cedars, was occupied by three men, when the twinkling stars gradually faded and retired before the coming day. The scene was a peculiar one, and not without interest.

The trio were Mark, Old Business, and the captive outlaw. Having full confidence in the rawhide thongs, the trailer and Mark had spent several hours in sleep, lying before the low, narrow entrance. Then, awaking, Old Business kindled a fire, and producing the necessary materials from his cache in the corner, cooked some bacon and made a pot of coffee. Just now he was squatting before his prisoner, feeding him, the flickering glow of the tiny fire lighting up his face.

"You needn't try to put on frills with me," quietly spoke the trailer. "I know you from A to Ampersand, an' I don't b'lieve you've quite forgotten me, yit. Ef so, you know that I don't often say a thing twicet. I reckon you'd better take a bite and sup."

Though with evident loathing, the outlaw obeyed, swallowing the fat meat with difficulty, and drinking the black, muddy compound with a wry face.

"What do you intend doing with me?" he asked, as Old Business appeared satisfied with the obedience shown.

"What I mean to do fust, is easy told," slowly replied the trailer. "I'm goin' to swap you off. A'ter that—well, you'll know better when the time comes. Now, boy," he added, turning to Mark; "you jest step outside with me, an' I'll give ye your 'structions. Thar mustn't be no mistakes in this job—'twouldn't be healthy."

As soon as they disappeared, Pacific Pete sought once more to burst the bands which held him helpless, throwing his entire strength into the effort, but the rawhide cord only cut deeper into his white flesh, without giving one particle. Old Business chuckled grimly as he re-entered the den and saw the flushed, damp brow, but he made no remarks, simply lifting the captive upright, after severing the thongs upon his feet.

With a hand upon either shoulder, Pacific Pete was forced to walk rapidly toward the Retreat, but when the valley was cleared, the order changed. Mark Austin walked in the rear, holding the rope in one hand, a cocked revolver in the other, while Old Business glided along in advance, his keen eyes roving everywhere, with rifle ready for instant use.

In this manner they reached the top of the range lying opposite the outlaw's den, when they came to a halt. Motioning for Mark to keep a good lookout, the trailer addressed his captive.

"You've had time enough to recognize me—I can see by your eyes that you know who I am. Knowing this, you will be more ready to believe what I am going to say. So listen, and mark my words. In the cave yonder is a young woman, called Edna Brand. I've sworn to set her free, for she loves and is loved by Mark, yonder, my nephew. I'm going to offer you for her—long odds, you may think, but don't forget that I am only giving you up for a time. For years I have trailed you, my hatred growing deeper and more intense with every day; but I can afford to be patient, when I know that I can put my hand upon you at any time."

"One thing more. I am going to take you down there; but you need hope for nothing from your men. I will hold a revolver at your temple—not your heart; I've learned the secret of your charmed life, you see. At the first sign of treachery, you die. After that, I don't care much what becomes of me. So, for your own sake, you had better not leave the plain trail which I mark out for you."

"But if they refuse to obey me—"

"Then we'll die together—a romantic ending, quite in keeping with our lives. But there; I've said enough. Mark," he added, turning to Austin; "you know the part you have to play. If you don't hear from me in half an hour, you can be sure that we two are rubbed out, and you must try the other places."

With one hand firmly holding the outlaw's collar, Old Business coolly descended the hill, only pausing when beneath the bullet-scarred cedar tree. At his command Pacific Pete uttered a peculiar whistle; the usual signal, when the figure of Wister promptly appeared at the cave entrance. Old Business smiled grimly as he noticed the lieutenant's start of surprise and heard his little exclamation of wonder, on beholding the disgraceful situation of his chief. Pacific Pete shuddered with shame, and made a motion as though about to end all by one mad struggle for liberty; but as the cold iron touched his temple, and a low, warning hiss parted the trailer's lips, he realized the utter folly of such an action, and submitted to the inevitable.

"Repeat what I say, word for word," sternly muttered Old Business; then adding, "Wister, I've got into trouble, and I rely upon your helping me out; but it can only be done in one way. The faintest sign of violence will be the signal for my death. This man has sworn to blow my brains out, in such a case, and he will keep his word. He has captured me, and as ransom demands that I give up to him the young woman, Eli Brand's daughter. I have consented, and I ask you to help me carry the exchange out. Warn the men that my life depends upon their strict obedience."

Word for word the outlaw chief repeated this speech, though his voice was unsteady and his face flushed deep with mortification and rage. Truly it was a bitter blow, to be so humiliated before those who had, until now, looked upon him as little less than a demigod.

"An' jest add from me, mister man," called out the trailer to Wister; "that I'm jest little Old Business chuck up to the han'le. Tell the boys in yender that they kin rub me out, mebbe, but they caint do it quick enough to keep me from sp'ilin' the head-kiverin' o' this rooster. I reckon that's plain enough talk."

Pacific Pete, his hands bound behind him, the cold muzzle of a cocked revolver touching his temple, was forced to cross the valley and climb to the ledge before the eager, curious eyes of a score of his men. Trembling in every nerve, pale as a ghost, he looked more dead than alive. A more merciless punishment for one of his proud, haughty spirit could not have been devised. And it was to enjoy this to the full that Old Business chose the greater danger of entering the cave after Edna instead of having her brought forth.

The trailer paused when fairly upon the ledge, and holding his captive firmly, undaunted by the angry, threatening glances cast upon him, said:

"Glad to meet ye, gen'lemen, one an' all. Yer see I'm on a tower o' pleasure an' fun gen'aliy, an' your boss, hyar, brung me here to see how the old thing works. From all 'pearances, I've chose a orkward time fer my visit—you look like my old woman used to when I'd bring home a crowd to dinner in house-cleanin' time. But don't be skeered. I won't

stay long. Only—one thing. I'm drefful nervous—hain't got no more narves than a old maid when she sees a rat. Nur I couldn't never stand a joke. Ef you was to try to skeer me, say with a knife, pistol or any sech thing, I feel in my bones that I'd do somethin' turrible—blow the hull top o' the head off o' the boss, here, more'n likely."

"Enough of this nonsense," said Pacific Pete, in a low, strained voice. "You understand him, men. I ask you not to interfere; not because I really fear death, but because I wish to live to repay him all these insults—as I will—ten thousand fold!"

"Good enough! that's the kind of talk I like to hear," and the trailer laughed recklessly. "Some o' you fellers light us to the place whar the gal is kept."

A nod from the outlaw chief enforced this order, and catching up a rude lamp, Wister led the way to the little chamber where Old Business, as Marco of the Scar, had peered in upon the sleeping maiden. With a little cry, Edna shrunk back, a look of terror upon her pale, worn face, but Old Business hastened to reassure her.

"You sha'n't be hurt, little one. Your friends hev found you out, an' I've come to lead you to them. You'll go?"

The brief gleam of hope faded from the maiden's face.

"I have no friends—even my father has deserted me!"

"You have two friends, at least, little one," was the earnest reply; "myself and Mark Austin. You can trust us; I am old enough to be your father, and Mark—easy thar—make another move like that, an' you're a gone sucker!" he cried, as Pacific Pete sought to free himself, seeing a gleam of hope in the trailer's interest in Edna; but Old Business was not to be caught napping.

"I will trust you—anything is better than to remain here and suffer the insults—"

"Every one of these insults shall be bitterly atoned for—you hear that?" and the trailer glared fiercely upon the two men. "I swear it—by the great Eternal!"

"You won't have long to wait for the chance," quietly replied Wister. "I can read death written upon your forehead now."

"It's your'n, then," laughed Old Business. "Come, little one; we'd better be travelin'. You keep close to me, but don't git skeered an' grab my arm, as these varmint mought give me trouble. Now, old boss, lead the way back."

In silence the quartette retraced their steps, speedily reaching the outer chamber. Still holding Pacific Pete firmly, Old Business stepped out upon the ledge and uttered a shrill whistle. The next moment Mark Austin broke cover and came running swiftly forward. Pale and trembling, scarce able to believe her eyes, Edna recognized the loved one whom she had, until that moment, believed dead. Then, forgetting all else, she sprung into his arms. And Mark? His bashfulness was not so great as to prevent his improving the golden opportunity, and Edna's pale lips grew red beneath his passionate kisses.

"I don't blame ye for likin' it, boy—no, I don't," laughed Old Business. "I used to play bum'lebee myself, when I was younger an' better lookin'; but don't you think you'd better put off the rest ontel you kin take it more quiet-like? Thar—you know what I told ye. Go do it."

"I have kept my part of the contract," said Pacific Pete, as the lover hastily left the ledge. "Keep yours—remove your hand."

"I will—when they have got long enough start," was the cool reply. "I'm not such a fool, thank you. Come; you and I are going over to the tree, yonder. We'll wait there just half an hour. Then I'll set you free, unharmed, nor will I try to harm you until you have armed yourself."

White with baffled rage, the outlaw chief could do nothing but submit while the pistol muzzle was at his head. Together the couple reached the cedar tree, where, as he expected, Old Business found his rifle, left there by Mark. Seated side by side they waited until the half hour had crept by. Then casting his captive loose, Old Business caught up his rifle and leaped behind a bowlder.

In obedience to a shrill yell from Pacific Pete, the outlaws poured forth from the cave, fully armed. A rifle-crack; then revolver shots—Old Business was at work!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

LOVE AND VENGEANCE.

AGAIN the little cave beneath the three cedars was inhabited, again its echoes were awakened by the sound of human voices; but the voices were soft and low, breathing of love, devotion and peacefulness.

Edna nestled close beside Mark, his arms wound tightly yet tenderly around her yielding form, her eyes looking up into his with an expression of trusting love that not even the dim, subdued light that shimmered down from above could conceal.

The words had been spoken, the question asked and answered. From this day, henceforward, their trail in life was to be the same.

Thus they sat, for hour after hour, scarce speaking a word, yet busily conversing with eyes and lips, repeating and answering the same old, old story; and the little green lizard cocked its head upon one side, a shrewd twinkle in its glittering,

diamond eyes, just as though it understood their mute speech.

The day wore on. The sun passed the point from whence its rays streamed into the little cave. The light gradually grew more and more dim. Edna nestled closer to her lover. A dreamy, delicious languor crept over her senses, and then, close held to her lover's breast, she slumbered.

A low, peculiar whistle came floating to Austin's ear, and he listened eagerly for its repetition. Again the signal sounded, and no longer doubting, the young miner answered it. He knew that his friend, Old Business, was at hand.

The sound, continuous as it was, awoke Edna, and, blushing deeply in the friendly gloom, she shrunk back as a dark figure suddenly entered the cave. Not a little to Mark's surprise, a second followed; but the voice of Old Business quickly reassured him.

"I've brung ye a visitor, children, but don't be oneasy. Thar ain't much danger o' his ever tellin' what he sees here. Children, 'low me to interduce the meanest, pizenest, most or'nary two-legged critter 'at ever disgraced human natur'—which is Eli Brand, Eskwire."

"My father!" gasped Edna, her fingers closing upon Mark's arm as she drew closer to him; an involuntary movement of dread.

"Thar's jest whar you make a mistake, little one," and Old Business gave a satisfied chuckle. "Please the pigs you never come from no sech or'nary, low-lived stock as him! Strawberries don't grow on jimson weeds—not much! No, no, my little turkle-dove—the dirty old buzzard lied when he called you da'ter, an' one o' my reasons fer bringin' him here was to make him 'fess the hull truth consarnin' you."

Edna was fairly stupefied by this blunt assertion, and could scarce believe her ears; yet there was an accent of truth in the trailer's tone that forbade the idea of his jesting.

"Now, old pizon," he added, addressing Brand, "I'm goin' to unlock your mouth, but jest b'ar in mind that I ain't in the humor for standin' any nonsense. When I ax you a question you'll answer it, jist as straight as you can wag your tongue. I mean to hev the hull truth out o' you, ef I hev to tortur' you 'om now till the cows come home. You understand?"

"I'll confess everything—only spare my life!" gasped Eli Brand, as the gag was removed from between his jaws. "Give me time to repent—I'm not fit to die!"

"You think you're fit to live, I s'pose—sweet Corneille! But look here. I ain't goin' to make any terms with sich a pizon critter as you. You've run the length o' your halter, but you'll be brung up easier if you make a clean breast o' everythin'. That's all I kin promise ye."

With a groan of miserable fear the captive relapsed into silence, while Old Business, having lighted his pipe, crouched down beside the entrance and briefly explained to Mark and Edna what had occurred after their departure, at the same time keeping a close lookout through the leafy screen, as though expecting pursuit.

He told her he had waited under the cedar tree until he knew that Mark and Edna had time to break their trail and reach the covert. Then he picked off Wister with his rifle, emptied one revolver into the mass of yelling outlaws, and, satisfied that they would think only of him in their thirst for revenge, he fled at the top of his speed.

Up hill and down dale the chase led, but the trailer was soon convinced that not one among the pursuers could nearly equal him either in speed or endurance, and when satisfied with the distance he had led them from the little cave he put his whole powers into play and rapidly distanced the outlaws. Then doubling, he broke his trail in a running stream, and bent his way—not to the cave, but back to the spot where Eli Brand had concealed the gold for which he had twice committed murder. He reasoned shrewdly that Brand would not be long away from where his heart's treasure was hidden. Fortune stood his friend still. Scarcely had he reached the spot when Brand came up the valley. He had lain for an hour insensible, from the effects of the trailer's last kick, and when he finally recovered he made all haste to regain his *cache*, meaning to flee from his comrades in crime that very night. Instead, he was captured by Old Business, just as he realized the horrible fact of his dearly bought gold having disappeared. Bound and gagged, he was driven to the cave beneath the three cedars.

"I knowed he wouldn't be very pleasant company, but the pizon tarantuler o' nat'ral cussedness hes got some secrets in his knowledge box which we'll all be the better for his spit-tin' out. Now, old Rusty, unlimber your tongue. Fust, tell me the hull truth 'bout this lady, here. Don't 'low yourself to lie, or—"

Brand, evidently realizing the utter folly of resistance, obeyed. In a low, dogged tone, he briefly narrated the same story which had so deeply interested Pacific Pete two nights before, with some additions. The man who was killed at his feet that night, full sixteen years ago, was named Maurice Vanoy. For years they had been partners and comrades in sin, though Vanoy was ever the leader. At his death Brand was true to his pledge, and carried the little girl—whom he called Edna from that time on—far away with him. Since that day he had been a father to her, had loved—

"I don't reckon you'd better try that line, old crockerdile," dryly observed the trailer. "You hain't studied the part long enough. You'll make more by playing a straight hand. Now, tell us 'bout this Gospel Dick a'fair?"

Eli Brand cowered down, trembling in every limb, a wild, hunted look filling his eyes. His lips parted, but no words issued. He seemed incapable of speaking. Nor did Old Business press the matter. In a cold, monotonous voice he uttered these words:

"It is night. The half round moon looks down upon the valley. What does it see? A collection of huts, scattered over the town and rugged-looking hollow. Of all that camp, only one man seems awake. He, like a venomous serpent, is silently creeping toward one of the huts. He slits open the canvas. He enters—bends over the sleeping man, and then—! The swift downward stroke, the dull *thud* as a knife strikes against the heaving, convulsed breast; a brief struggle, followed by another blow. Then a grasping for the blood-stained gold—the wages of sin. The serpent creeps forth—the moonlight touches his face. I see it—I recognize it. Eli Brand, you are the murderer!"

The wretch cowered lower, his face that of a living corpse. Again that monotonous voice fills the cave.

"I see a madman fighting for life with a huge bear. The ground is covered with blood. Both are weak, but the long knife has touched the seat of life. The man will be the victor. Not alone do I see this. Other eyes are watching the thrilling scene; the eyes of a white man. He carries a rifle. He raises it. Perhaps he fears that the bear will prove the victor. He fires. Man and beast fall to the ground. The marksman turns, and fleeing, never once looks behind him. The man and the bear lie still. There is a bullet-hole in the man's skull. First murdered in mind, now murdered in body."

"Eli Brand, that murdered man was my brother; Gospel Dick was John Richard Austin. We parted years ago, in anger, yet there was a pure, sincere love underneath all. I learned of his strange disappearance, and swore to solve the mystery. I have kept my word in part. Before this sun sets I will have kept it in every particular. Your hours, your minutes of life are numbered. Pray, if you can, for mercy hereafter; you shall receive none on earth."

"Mercy—have mercy!" gasped the trembling wretch. "I am not fit to die—spare me!"

"As you spared him—the same mercy which you measured out to my brother, that same mercy shall you receive from me—that and none other," was the cold, stern reply.

"Spare him, for my sake," faltered Edna, clinging to the arm of the avenger. "Give him time to repent."

"And you ask this—you! He coldly sold you for gold—sold you to a life of utter misery and shame!"

"I have called him father—he is not all bad. Do not destroy his soul as well as his body. Give him one more chance!"

"I will repent—yes, I'll repent," whined Eli Brand, licking his parched, cracked and bleeding lips.

"I would do much for you, little one," said Old Business, in a low, more gentle tone. "But not this. If an angel from heaven were to descend and plead with me for yonder craven's life, even though he offered me absolution for all my sins, even though he threatened me with eternal damnation for refusing, I would say to him, as I say to you, this man shall die—die by my hands, this very night!"

"Then good-by, and forever! Spare him, and I will love you; murder him, and I shall hate you—loathe and despise you!" cried Edna, her eyes flashing.

"Don't say that!" and the trailer shrunk back as though dealt a bitter blow. "You don't know what you're saying. Edna, darling, I am your father!"

But the maiden shrunk back into Mark's arms, as though terrified.

With a bitter groan, the trailer bowed his head upon his hands.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BEGINNING OF THE END.

OLD BUSINESS saw that the time was not ripe for his story, and, with a desperate effort, regained his wonted composure. He silently bent over Eli Brand and thrust the gag once more between his aching, bleeding jaws, binding it securely into place, then, in a cold, dry tone, he spoke to Mark.

"It's nearly time we were taking the trail. There's no safety for either of you stopping in these parts. Before this Pike will have done his errand and will be on the road here. It will save both time and trouble if we go to meet him."

"And you?" hesitated Mark, with a side glance toward the prisoner.

"Will accompany you—at least until she is beyond all risk. After that—well, if we live, we'll learn."

In silence Old Business cooked some bacon and made a pot of coffee, of which he partook heartily, though neither Edna nor Mark betrayed much hunger. Then, after a brief scout around the premises, the trailer motioned the lovers to follow him, and they were gradually swallowed up in the darkness.

They trudged on through the night, halting only once to afford Edna a moment's rest. Fatigue seemed to pass them by, unrecognized. Edna and Mark dreaming of love; the trailer was busy with the past.

The sun had scarcely risen when they met a strong body of men, mounted and on foot, among the foremost of whom rode Lufe Pike. The greeting seemed warm between the two gray-haired men; but the trailer's voice sounded hard and cold as he answered the eager, appealing look.

"Yes, I'll show you your daughter. You have my word." Then turning to the leader of the posse: "You see, old man, I've kept my word, and all you'll have to do is to bag the

game I've corraled. But now—do me a favor. Send a couple of men back with these young folks, to Wild-cat. It's hard to lose the fun, I know, but I'll pay them ten ounces apiece, besides giving them my share of the plunder."

Terms so liberal were not long in being accepted, and then the quartette rode away toward Wild-cat. Edna glanced back, and seemed about to speak, but something in the cold, stern face of the avenger repelled her, and the words died away upon her lips.

A rapid march of several hours brought the party within a mile of the mountain cavern, when, at the suggestion of Old Business, they halted long enough to overhaul their weapons and put everything in order for a deadly, relentless struggle when the conquered must die, without hope of quarters. Then they moved on until the top of the hollow hill could be seen, when the trailer volunteered to spy out the ground, and learn, if possible, whether the outlaws suspected their presence in force.

As Old Business glided forward he was not a little surprised to find that Lufe Pike kept him close company. In vain he motioned him back.

"You promised to show me my child," was the dogged reply. "If they kill you, you can't. I'm going along to fight for you if they discover you."

Silently they crept along, nearing the cavern. All was still. Not a sign of human life could be seen. The place seemed deserted. A sickening dread filled the trailer's heart. Had his game fled, just as his hand was ready to close upon it? The thought was well-nigh maddening, and it caused him to forget the stealthy caution thus far observed, in his eagerness to solve the question.

He was just cumbering upon the edge when a lithe figure sprang out from the cavern and fired two swiftly-succeeding shots, at the same time uttering a shrill yell of taunting triumph. The trailer flung up his arms and fell heavily backward, bearing Pike down with him, covering him with his blood as they rolled rapidly down the steep incline.

Laughing sharply, the marksman sprang to the edge of the rocky platform and peered eagerly downward. His face was ghastly white, his black eyes were glaring with an almost insane fire. In that moment Pacific Pete seemed a demon of vengeance rather than a mortal being.

He saw one of the figures stagger to his feet, brushing the blood and dirt from his eyes, then stoop and lift the limp, senseless form of the other in his arms. It was Lufe Pike endeavoring to carry Old Business away from the spot of death.

Again that shrill, mocking laugh was blended with a sharp report as the deadly revolver spoke again, and as the blue smoke-wreath lifted upon the air, two figures were visible lying across a small boulder, their life-blood trickling down and mingling in one dark pool.

Then Pacific Pete vanished. The hill again seemed deserted.

With the first shot the sheriff and his posse started forward at the double-quick, breaking into a full run as they witnessed the shot that carried death to poor Pike. All thought of prudence was cast to the winds. Burning with a wild lust for vengeance, those hardy men scaled the hill, climbed over the rock ledge, and dashed at the cave entrance. A withering sheet of flame-tinged smoke poured out into their very faces, carrying death upon its leaden wings, but not even such a warm reception could check their ardor. Clearing the way with a storm of pistol bullets, they plunged recklessly into the dark cavern.

Of the fight that followed but little can be said. All details were swallowed up by the gloom. Outnumbered by more than two to one, the outlaws fought desperately, their perfect knowledge of the interior nearly equalizing the contest.

The coolest, most deliberate of all, was Pacific Pete. He quietly avoided all personal collision, contenting himself with picking off the foremost of his enemies from a safe point. Few, indeed, were the shots he wasted. Wherever his revolver pointed, there death or disability quickly followed. More than once his shots were answered, some keen-eyed miner firing at the flash, but the outlaw leader seemed to bear a charmed life, though more than once he staggered back for a moment, as though struck.

All at once the outlaw chief seemed seized with a mortal fear. A low cry parted his lips, the smoking weapon fell from his hand, his face showed ghastly pale in the flickering, uncertain light of the dying fire. And then—the form of Pacific Pete melted away in the gloom, leaving his men to battle with their stern, relentless foe as best they might, no longer sustained by his presence and deadly hand.

The darkness, as he fled, was momentarily lighted up by a pistol-shot, and a sharp cry broke from the outlaw's lips as he staggered and almost fell. Yet, the next moment his pistol echoed forth the death knell of Juan Ceberra; for he was the skulker who had fired the shot, whether recognizing the one who had so haughtily acted the master over him, or, in his terror, believing the shadowy figure that of an avenging vigilante, can only be surmised.

With a wavering step, struggling against a strange lassitude, with a low, weird ringing in his ears and a heavy weight compressing his brain—against these the outlaw chief struggled with the indomitable will of old. And through the darkness, guided only by habit, the strange, deathly sickness creeping up, growing stronger and more choking with every moment still on, though above the shuffling tread of his heavy feet up on the hard, rocky floor, could be distinguished a faint pattering sound—the sound of falling blood.

His head turned, and as he glanced back, a strange, phos-

phorescent fire filled his eyes, until they shone and glared like the orbs of some wild beast. Incoherent mutterings broke from his lips. With his blood-stained hands he motioned back—what?

Only in fancy was he pursued. And yet to him these spectral forms were more terrible than reality. The sins of a lifetime were haunting him—the victims of a wild, blood-stained, reckless life, were trooping at his heels in ghastly array, gibbering and mocking at him, stretching out their long arms to grasp him, a stern, relentless vengeance written upon every lineament.

Shrieking aloud in his terror, Pacific Pete fled through the darkness, guided by instinct rather than reason, marking his trail with a long line of blood, each mad bound shortening his lease of life, pumping the hot life-blood in strong jets from the round bullet-wound.

Entering the small chamber where Mark Austin had first awakened to captivity, the madman sprang through the curtain and dropped into the pit beyond. The rock-door still remained open, just as Old Business and his nephew had left it. And still followed by the accusing phantoms, Pacific Pete hurried through the tunnel.

His voice was stilled now. No sound came from his parched throat. His breath came hot and quick. His brain seemed on fire, and the low, weird singing in his ears grew louder and louder, until now it seemed the deep booming roll of thunder.

Yet he reached the end of the tunnel, and with the last effort of an overtasked frame, flung the concealed trap-door open. Then he drooped forward, lying half out of the opening, like a dead man, never recognizing the tall, blood-stained figure standing before him, as though watching for his appearance.

Stooping, Old Business dragged the limp form out of the tunnel, then, raising it in his arms with as much apparent ease as though it had been the body of an infant, he strode rapidly away. Down the valley, round the hill point, then, bending his way toward the main entrance of the outlaws' retreat, the avenger paused only when he reached the foot of the steep trail.

The motionless form of a man lay there, propped against a boulder. Only for the faintly-moving eyes, one would have thought him a dead man, yet Lafe Pike still lived—lived to remind the trailer of his sacred promise.

"You told me—my child—I'm dying—and you—"

"Harvey Wilson, look at me well. I am Philip Epes, your son-in-law, and here, in Pacific Pete or Vincente Barada, the outlaw and murderer, the man whose hand has laid you low, behold your daughter—my wife!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE GRAVE COVERS ALL.

Two human forms propped up against the rocks, the life-blood slowly trickling down and forming a red pool between them. The face of one old, wrinkled, surrounded with gray hair; the other smooth, clear as marble, despite the gray shade of death which was steadily creeping over them both. No longer disguised by the false mustache, the neatly-fitting wig; with garments thrown open at the throat to assist recovery, among them a tight waist of fawn-skin, fitting closely over the swelling bosom, compressing it into less tell-tale proportions, and a flexible, magnificent shirt of mail, whose tiny links had turned many a dagger-point, flattened many a bullet—no longer Vincente Barada or Pacific Pete, but Isabella.

Beside them stood Old Business—Philip Epes. Casting aside his uncouth disguise, he stood there, a man among men. The blood still trickled down his face, but he heeded not the pain of his wound; he had thoughts only for the two persons lying so helplessly before him. His thoughts were busy with the past. One by one the more prominent events of his troubled life came up before him. What did he see?

Two brothers. One, the elder, steady and thoughtful, a minister of the gospel. The other a careless, devil-may-care, yet withal good-hearted youth. "Gospel Dick" and himself.

The family of Harvey Wilson, a go-ahead merchant of speculative tendencies, yet fiery-tempered, vindictive and suspicious; his wife, a devotee of fashion; rumor added an incorrigible flirt whom marriage had failed to cure; an only child, Isabella, at that time sixteen years of age.

Isabella and Philip met and were introduced at a ball. From that evening a new life began for them both. Both really beautiful, both intelligent and accomplished, both young, their veins filled with hot, ardent blood, both fell in love. Philip proposed; Isabella acknowledged that the sentiment was reciprocated, and the next morning the lover waited upon the great merchant in his office.

A stormy scene. Wilson twitted Philip with his poverty, accusing him of being a beggarly fortune-hunter. Epes angrily retorted; the result—ejected with positive violence from the store by the porters.

That night all Baltimore was convulsed—horrified with the rumor of a terrible crime in high life. Harvey Wilson had been arrested for a double murder.

The brief truth was this. After his stormy interview with Philip, the merchant hastened home, knowing the headstrong temperament of his daughter, and fearing an elopement. He found his wife with company—an ex-captain of the regulars, as well as one whom his wife had thrown over for him. What

he saw was never known. Enough that it made him a madman, or rather developed the germ of insanity, long hereditary in his family.

The servants fled and summoned assistance. Wilson was captured after a frightful struggle. The room resembled a slaughter pen. His wife, the man, lay there dead. His daughter, who had rashly sought to stay his hand, was insensible, covered with blood, breathing hard; the physician decided that the fractured skull could only result in death or insanity.

Harvey Wilson was pronounced insane and sent to the State Asylum. For five years he remained an inmate, then was discharged as cured. For what? He was a ruined man, in health, mind and earthly goods. He asked for his daughter. She had died, so they told him. Then he disappeared—no one knew or cared whither.

Better for all, perhaps, had Isabella died. But, despite the doctor's predictions, she recovered; seemingly as well as before, both in body and mind, yet—Philip remained true to her, and despite the prayers and reasonings of his brother, married her. That was the last feather. The brothers parted in anger, never to meet again in life.

Then came a few fast fleeting months of almost delirious happiness—far too intense to be lasting. All in all to each other, Isabella and Philip lived in their cozy Southern home—an humble cottage, but all that he could afford. It was a sturdy struggle, but he kept the wolf from the door, and asked nothing better so long as he had her love to sustain him when jaded and weary. Thus the months passed by.

A little daughter was born unto them. Their cup of bliss seemed full. Yet, the bond that should have drawn their hearts still closer together was fated to sever them. No longer even-tempered and sunny, Isabella gradually gave way to fits of gloom and despondency, which grew deeper day by day, until she at length taunted Philip with his poverty. Day by day it grew worse, until he, knowing how little he deserved her bitter words, took to drink.

In one of his sprees he visited New Orleans, and with an extraordinary run of luck broke one of the richest gambling banks in the city. A month later Isabella found herself mistress of a mansion in the Queen City. And Philip Epes became a professional gambler.

Though his wife was gay, fond of fashionable dissipation, he never once dreamed of the terrible blow in store for him, until he found that Isabella had fled from him with a handsome gambler, his partner, in fact, one Maurice Vanoy, taking their child with her.

Two years later he found them. At Eli Brand's feet he killed Vanoy; but then lost all trace of both his wife and child.

Of his subsequent life, enough has already been detailed in these pages, for the reader to connect the stray threads.

Of Isabella, conjecture alone can aid us. The wild life upon which she voluntarily entered after the death of her lover, can only be explained by referring to the taint of insanity hereditary in her blood, added to the terrible shock of that day, when she was stricken down by the bloodstained hand of her father. Her "double life," as Isabella and Pacific Pete, was probably devised at first as a "card," to increase the interest in "The Golden Horn of Plenty," but the mad passion with which Mark Austin inspired her, caused the part to be played far more openly than she had intended, and finally proved her ruin.

With a low, faint sigh, Isabella opened her eyes. Yet a film seemed spread before them, as she gazed feebly, wonderingly around. She started as a cry broke from Wilson's lips, but her eyes met his without recognition.

"Do you know me?" said Philip Epes, speaking in a cold, monotonous tone, as he bowed his head until their eyes were upon a level. "Look at me well."

A convulsive shudder shook the woman's frame, and a wild, hunted look came into her eyes, as she strove to speak. But the words refused utterance. Only a blood-flecked froth tinged her lips.

"I see you have not forgotten," the trailer continued. "It is well. I wanted you to know all before you died. I don't mean to reproach you with the past; you were a woman—all is said in those words. But I wanted you to know that my vengeance has never slept since the day when I was first awakened to a sense of my folly, of your perfidy. I killed your lover; I destroyed your band at Wild-cat, just as I have here. I have thwarted you in every thing. That has been my revenge. You were a woman, and I could not strike at your life."

"I saved her—our daughter—just as I saved him, my nephew—the man whom you tried to make love you. They are together now. They love each other, and before this week ends, they will be wedded to each other. This is my revenge."

"Look at the man before you. He is dying. Your hand aimed the shot that cuts short his life. And that man is—your father! This is my revenge."

Only once did the look of wild terror change—when the trailer mentioned Mark's name. Then a slight spasm, a longing look in the large eyes; after it the old, hunted look.

Epes gnawed his long mustache moodily, as he stood looking down upon the ghastly white face. He saw now that his words had fallen meaningless upon her ears. He saw her eyes light up, saw the hunted look pass from her face, while a faint smile played around her lips. He heard the words—low, faint as the fluttering breath of a new-born infant:

"Mark—forgive me—'twas love that—that made me so—so cruel. I love you—my God! how I love you!"

As though gifted with a supernatural strength, she stretched out her arms and leaned forward, a look of ineffable love in her eyes, though the frothy blood gurgled from her mouth.

This movement, the sound of her voice, seemed to awaken Harvey Wilson, though, until then, he looked like one already dead. That soft tone, the look of yearning love seemed to be for him. He leaned forward—their arms closed around each other's forms, their last breath mingled; then all was over. Father and daughter were at rest.

The victorious sheriff and his posse found their guide strangely engaged, digging a grave beneath the bullet-scarred cedar, with his knife and hands. Their questions were answered by a look so strange and chilling that the boldest drew back with a vague dread. And so they left him, alone with his dead.

Doggedly he persevered in his laborious task. The pit grew deeper and deeper. Ever and anon he would pause and gaze upon the two forms, still locked in that strange embrace. But the hard, stern look had left his face. Instead came, at such moments, an expression of unutterable anguish. His heart was not yet dead.

Carefully he moved the bodies to the grave. Baring his head and casting a swift look around, he bent forward and pressed his lips twice upon the cold, white forehead. It was the seal of forgiveness.

In one grave the father and child were laid. The earth was heaped over them. A flat stone, marked with a rude cross, was placed at the head. And then—with bared head bowed down, Philip Epes knelt beside the grave of his wife.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THREE TABLEUX.

THE pale moon looked down upon Dick's Pocket, its silvery beams faintly lighting up the peculiar scene. The wind moaned fitfully through the tree-tops and around the ragged boulders and pinnacles of gray rock, causing the weird, fantastic shadows of bush and tree to glide here and there, to assume a thousand strange shapes, until it seemed as though the phantom world had sent forth a delegation to witness the expiation of a terrible crime.

The figure of a man knelt beside the grave of Gospel Dick. His head was bared, his garments torn and blood-stained; a look of unutterable horror was upon his face as he uplifted it toward the orb of night.

Tall, with folded arms, his form drawn rigidly erect, a man stood over the kneeling, cowering figure. His face was worn and haggard, marked here and there with streaks of half-dried blood. There was a hard, steely glitter in his eyes. A statue of stone would be easier to move than his heart.

And yet, in a husky, strained voice, the kneeling wretch begs and pleads for mercy—for time to repent and save his soul from utter destruction. With a cold, icy smile, the avenger raises one hand and points upward to heaven. 'Tis there he must hope for mercy; there was none for him upon earth.

Then the voice of the avenger echoed hollowly through the little valley—counting the fast-fleeting seconds that separated the convicted assassin from the Great Hereafter.

A brief instant of horrible, sickening silence. A wild shriek from the lips of the doomed wretch. The sharp, spiteful crack of a revolver.

The moon slowly veiled its face behind a cloud. The moaning wind suddenly lulled. The silence of death reigned over Dick's Pocket.

Again it is night; but a far different scene awaits our attention.

All day Wild-cat has been in a commotion. Not because its bold sheriff and his gallant posse have returned from their brief but successful campaign against Vincente Barada's band of outlaws; that victory had already been commemorated by a "general drunk." No; something far more important was on the tapis. For the first time since its birth, Wild-cat was to witness a genuine wedding. Little wonder, then, at the excitement being so general. Little wonder that a delegation waited upon the bridegroom elect, and, in an eloquent speech, made known the earnest sentiments of the Wild-cats. How bitterly unjust it would be for him to persist in having the ceremony take place in the tiny little parlor of the Occidental Hotel, where not one tithe of the petitioners could even get one eye on the soul-thrilling spectacle. He, the mouthpiece of the honorable Wild-cats, begged to offer a substitute for the close, musty room; and so eloquently did he plead the case, that Edna, blushing like an angel in human guise, signed Mark to accede to the request.

There was not a laggard in all Wild-cat, that day. A constant string of sturdy figures in flannel shirts and slouched wide-awakes passed to and from the foothills, bearing great bundles of evergreens. Poles were firmly planted in the road and cedar sprigs and pine boughs were draped around them until a beautiful triumphal arch surmounted the evergreen altar. For hundreds of yards around the ground was

carpeted with the fragrant green sprays. And when the shades of night descended, all was in readiness.

The congregation was assembled, long before the appointed hour. Ah, what a glorious sight—one upon which the bright sun, the pale moon, nor the twinkling stars of Wild-cat had ever shone before. Let it go upon record here, as a matter of history; each and every Wild-cat there present had washed his face and hands, had combed both hair and beard! What matter that the fishes in the usually clear Vinegar Creek gasped and puffed, rubbing their eyes in mute wonder as the limpid stream gradually grew darker and more dense as the pulverized sand and long-accumulated smoke-tan slowly and reluctantly floated away from the human society to which it had so long and affectionately clung? As an offset, didn't the sand-sparrows chirp with delight as they chased the queer little rolls of sunburnt hair that rolled before the sea breeze? It made such cosy nest-lining. Indeed that was a day long to be remembered.

The handsome couple—Edna blushing, her eyes lustrous with love; Mark proud, treading as if upon air—passed up the human-lined aisle. And oh! what a proud man was Turn-up-Jack Gillson when the moccasined foot of the blooming bride accidentally trod upon his newly-washed cowhide boot! From that moment he looked down with scorn upon the "dollar anteites," all those who craved the honor of his acquaintance must have eyes too big for anything smaller than "quarter slugs."

The words were spoken. A tall, stately man gave away the bride—he whom the reader has known as Old Business.

Then—the real fun began. Two fiddles struck up a lively tune. A dozen sets were quickly formed—"stag-dances"—the beautiful bride looking on and smiling with a look of ineffable happiness. Then Mark whispered in her ear—she nodded a laughing assent. Ah! what a ringing cheer went up to heaven as the handsome couple joined one of the sets! Happy Wild-cats!

Twenty years have passed by since the curtain fell. It is evening—a balmy day in early summer. A prairie farm in Kansas. A small, but cosy frame building, covered to the roof with vines and rose-bushes. Under shade of the young elm trees before the house, are gathered four generations. First "Old Business," still hale and hearty. Then Mark Austin and his buxom wife, Edna. They have seven children, two of them married, and now a happy mother and father.

And so the sun goes down upon them, and hides them from our eyes forever.

THE END.

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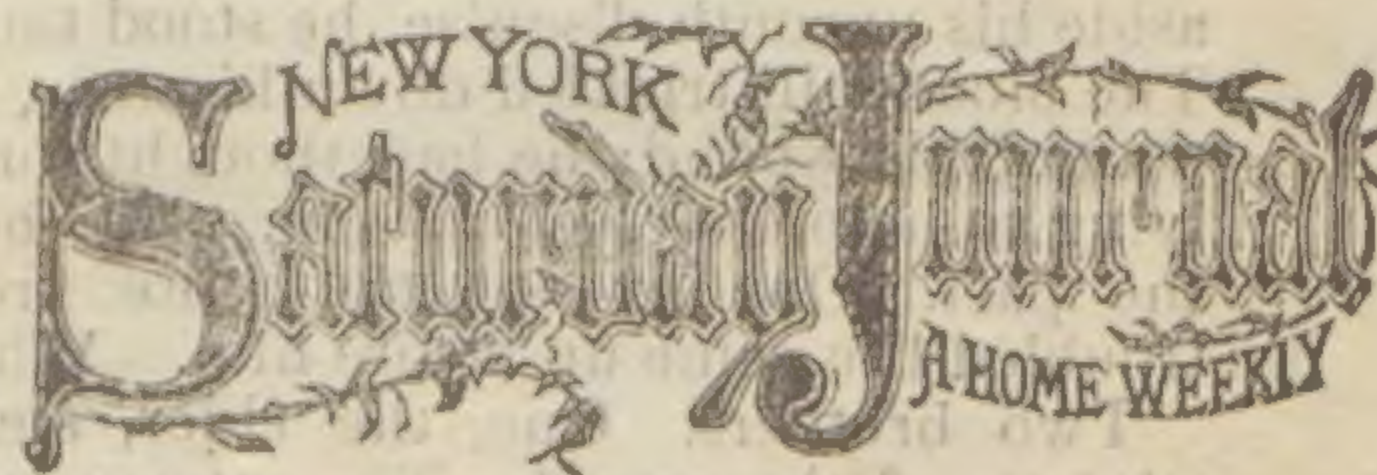
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